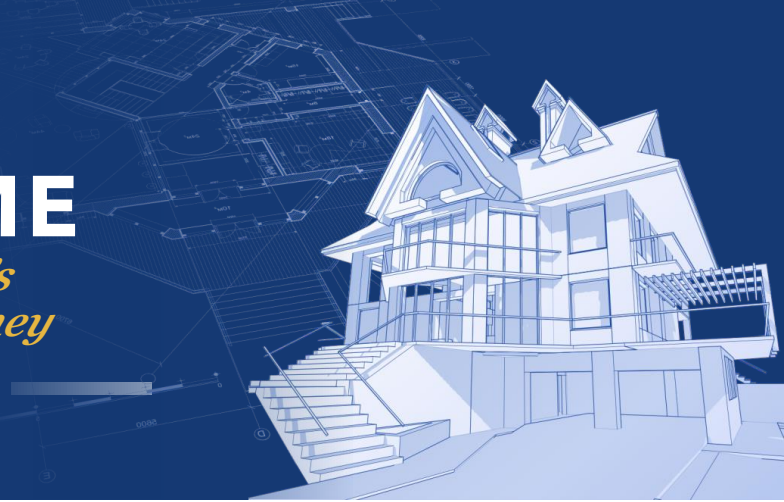# MAKING A HOUSE A HOME

Reflections on One Foundation's Evaluation and Learning Journey

June 2022

by Kim Ammann Howard

When The James Irvine Foundation posted a position for a director of impact assessment and learning, it immediately caught my eye. I had spent more than a decade working as a consultant to nonprofits and foundations designing, conducting, and overseeing evaluation, strategy, and applied research projects. The position with Irvine offered the opportunity to take insights and lessons I'd gained from that work and apply it in the context of a large and dynamic organization working on pressing issues in my own home state of California.

After six years, I have learned a lot about what it takes to design and lead an evaluation and learning function in philanthropy.

This piece sets out to document Irvine's evaluation and learning journey during my tenure and to offer reflections from this experience. It complements the recently released Evaluation and Learning at Foundations Field Guide by providing a case study of what it looks like to develop an evaluation and learning function over time, a rarely covered topic of interest to many working in this arena. My hope is that other evaluation and learning leaders find value in these reflections and are encouraged to share their own so that together we build a more effective and equitable field of evaluation and philanthropy.

This piece is organized into three main parts. It first describes the internal and external context in which the development of Irvine's evaluation and learning function took place. Next, it uses the metaphor of building a house to describe phases in the development of evaluation and learning at Irvine over time. Finally, it shares insights and lessons on key tensions, opportunities, and considerations leaders may face in this work.

When I first joined Irvine, it was undergoing a period of significant change. Under the leadership of its new CEO Don Howard, the foundation had recently announced a new strategic focus, and subsequently established a singular north star goal to unite all its work: a California where all low-income workers have the power to advance economically. Whereas before, Irvine had had three distinct program areas in the arts, civic engagement, and education, the foundation was now shifting toward a less siloed approach characterized by time-limited initiatives with specific outcome goals, timelines, and budgets.

The new focus represented a dramatically different way of working for Irvine's grantmaking staff. Historically, the foundation had relied heavily on external research and conversations with nonprofit and foundation colleagues to assess needs and formulate funding strategies. Under the new model, staff were expected to engage more deeply in listening and learning from grantees and the field, not just initially but over the lifespan of an initiative. Rather than being assigned to one program area, staff would now be deployed across initiatives using a matrixed model with the goal of better connecting the dots across grantmaking. While many were excited by these new developments, some grappled with changes, and there was some initial staff turnover.

Outside of Irvine, changes were also afoot in the broader fields of evaluation and philanthropy. Diversity, equity, and inclusion were rapidly becoming substantive topics of discussion, along with listening to grantees and community leaders and better incorporating their priorities and feedback into funder strategies. Growing economic inequality was catalyzing increased scrutiny of wealth, including philanthropy, and greater interest was emerging in how to get to the root causes of persistent social challenges. Foundations were leaning into systems approaches, adaptive strategies, and strategic learning. Evaluation and learning positions were expanding within philanthropy as foundations contended with the rising complexity of their work. Leaders in these positions were increasingly expected to be able to use learning to support organizational change management, adaptation of strategy, and equity-focused grantmaking.

It was within this context that Irvine set out to strengthen its approach to what it termed impact assessment and learning (IA&L), or the processes the foundation uses to measure its progress against its goals, to learn, and use that learning to inform continuous improvement. The first steps along this path involved establishing a director-level position and enabling a strategic build of the evaluation and learning function. Irvine hired me as director of IA&L, and I was immediately immersed in the strategic development process from the ground up.
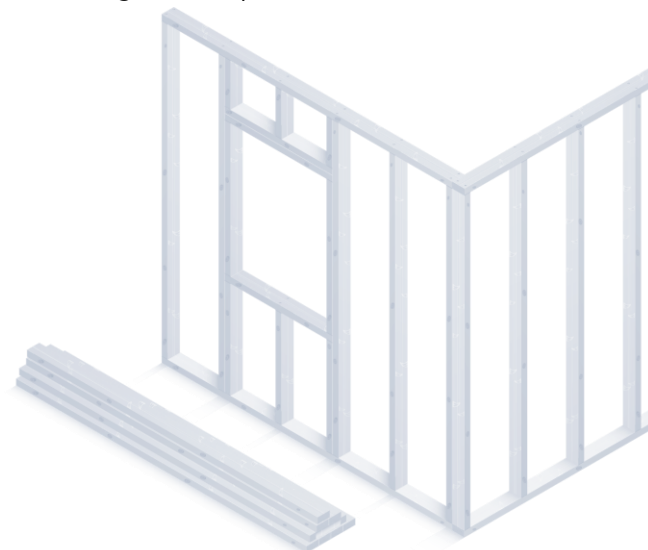
Looking back on this build-out, I was reminded of many parallels to building a house. First, there is an assessment of what type of house is needed prior to the development of initial blueprints. Once the blueprint is established and agreed upon, the build can begin – in this case while the house is filled with its residents. As progress is made, the house starts to feel more like a home. Over time, however, maintenance and renovation must continue as residents and needs change. Below is a brief description of each of these phases with a focus on key priorities, activities, and learnings.

PHASE 1: Assessing What Type of House is Needed

The first six months of my position involved developing an understanding of Irvine as an organization, taking stock of past evaluation and learning efforts, and identifying potential innovations that could fit the organizational context and current priorities. This process involved assessing the needs of different people who would be living in our house of evaluation and learning (staff), visiting it (grantees and communities), and overseeing it (leadership and board). Given the significant transitions that were underway, it became clear that embedding a strong IA&L approach would require attention to results – what we wanted to accomplish, process – the way we went about this work, and relationships – the quality of interpersonal connections.

I was initially drawn to Irvine due to its culture of learning, evaluation, and transparency. Fortunately, these initial six months confirmed that the "bones" of the existing house were strong and would

provide a good foundation for additional building. I came to see during this time that to best serve the foundation, the IA&L staff needed to place greater emphasis on forward-looking information to inform strategy (as opposed to retrospective assessment of impact); find ways to improve staff, leadership, board and grantee engagement in continuous improvement processes; and strengthen our internal and external listening and feedback practices.

The Field Guide's **First 100 Days: Getting a Handle on Your E&L Position** tool provides concrete steps for leaders stepping into new positions to grow their understanding of organizational context and expectations (page 17).

This early phase also involved piloting and testing different IA&L activities to better understand what the organization would value not just in theory but in practice. Applying the metaphor, I had to get a sense of the materials we might need to have on hand and the different ways people would use our house for evaluation and learning. The testing involved a great degree of trial and error. For example, I initially attempted to have each team throughout the organization develop a learning plan. The intent was to familiarize all teams with the practice of developing and assessing progress towards a couple of key goals that could inform their work in a meaningful way. In reality, this idea turned out to be too cumbersome to implement with a limited IA&L team amid all the organizational change that was happening concurrently. The experience served as a good lesson for the next phase.

PHASE 2: Designing the House

After taking stock of organizational context, priorities, and needs, the next phase of development involved establishing a blueprint for the house. We created a framework defining IA&L at Irvine, identifying a clear purpose and value proposition for this work, and conveying what IA&L would look like in practice. In developing this framework, we had conversations with grantees, staff, leadership, and board members to understand their IA&L expectations and concerns and test my own ideas and assumptions about what this work could and should look like. Through an iterative, robust process, we developed an IA&L Framework endorsed by the board, supported by staff, and shared with our grantees and the field. The Framework has served as a guiding document for our work, ensuring we stay on track, remain committed to our vision and goals for evaluation and learning, and continue to be accountable to those we seek to serve.

Another part of the design process was deciding how to expand the team to support implementation of the new framework. I considered a matrixed model in which IA&L team members would spend part of their time staffing the IA&L team and part of their time staffing initiatives, along with a more traditional model with team members that were full-time on IA&L. The grantmaking team was being matrixed for the first time in Irvine history with the intent of increasing integration and moving away from program silos. In this context, I opted for a matrixed model in IA&L as well, which presented the opportunity to embed evaluation and learning throughout the organization. Having IA&L staff on initiative teams enabled them to serve as champions and connectors for evaluation and learning, and to surface key issues to address. At the same time, I went in with eyes wide open about this approach expecting a significant challenge of keeping IA&L team members from being pulled away too much by their grantmaking responsibilities.

PHASE 3: Building the House, While Living in It

Once we had articulated and committed to a guiding framework for IA&L, the next challenge was to operationalize these concepts in practice. In other words, we needed to build the house while living in it – an exciting but sometimes messy undertaking. Some of our key goals during this phase included:

- Ensuring evaluation and strategy inform one another by establishing regular practices of learning, reflecting, and adapting;

- Cultivating listening and feedback loops across beneficiaries, grantees, and Irvine; and

- Using evaluation and learning to advance racial equity, a goal that became more explicit over time.

The Field Guide's **Identifying Quick Wins and Longer-Term Shifts: A Hypothetical Case Example** deep dive (page 16) illustrates how early wins can be critical to demonstrating the value of evaluation and learning and building the credibility needed to make longer-term shifts.

To ensure that evaluation and learning informs strategy, we developed IA&L plans for the foundation's first two substantial grantmaking initiatives since adoption of its north star goal. Identifying clear grantmaking goals and metrics and prospectively articulating evaluation approaches represented a new way of working at the foundation and proved to be an important early step. Developing these plans involved understanding and working through staff concerns about grantee burden, limitations on grantmaking flexibility, and accountability for impact goals of initiatives. It also required IA&L and grantmaking staff to forge new roles and practices. For example, to enhance ownership of grantmaking teams, we agreed that they would manage evaluations while IA&L staff would serve as advisors. During this time, we also led and facilitated efforts to update and strengthen internal processes related to due diligence and grantee reporting in collaboration with staff from across the organization.

Our commitment to listening and then using feedback to inform our work started robustly with Community Listening Sessions. These sessions, which took place across the state, helped to center the needs of community members Irvine seeks to serve. The sessions provided a way for staff and board members to engage with community members and for their hearts and minds to be moved by Irvine's new focus on workers earning low wages. This experience represented a key early win that showcased the value of listening and feedback and created momentum for this commitment to become a regular practice at Irvine. While initial listening efforts were led by IA&L leaders, they are now embedded in foundation practices and led by staff across Irvine, making the practice more integrated and sustainable.

Using evaluation and learning to advance racial equity was more implicit than explicit during this period. Then, as Irvine became more explicit about equity at the organizational level, it provided greater momentum foundation-wide and an opening for IA&L work to be more explicit about equity. The Equitable Evaluation Framework™ has served as a helpful tool for cultivating a shared understanding and language over time about how evaluation and learning can, and must be, in service of advancing equity. We now name our intention to use evaluation and learning not only to enhance impact but in service of equity – and we acknowledge that sometimes there is a conflict between enhancing impact and equity. Similarly, we deliberately pursue equity through our practice of listening to those we seek to serve, striving to be accountable to those communities.

PHASE 4: Making the House Feel Like a Home – Using and Embedding Evaluation and Learning Throughout

The prior phase resulted in important insights and lessons about how to effectively partner with staff on IA&L-related efforts. We found a benefit in being flexible in terms of our role and proactive in making decisions about where it was best to lead, partner, or play a more supportive, behind-the scenes function. We also had success with our focus on building staff comfort with different initiative-related evaluation and learning tools and practices (e.g., IA&L plans for initiatives, grantee impact reports).

Next, we were able to turn our attention to more deeply embedding IA&L across organizational practices, policies, and systems. This work included a variety of activities, such as:

- Ensuring that concepts core to the IA&L approach were reflected in organization goals, discussions about foundation values and our DEI approach, ongoing organizational meeting agendas, and different organizational roles and responsibilities (e.g., team charters, job descriptions, interview protocols).

- Leading and designing foundation-wide learning events and activities (e.g., staff engagement surveys, an outside speakers' series called Voices from the Field, annual listening efforts) that helped to engage staff across departments and keep our commitment to evaluation and learning visible.

- Ensuring IA&L representation across different organizational venues related to grantmaking (e.g., initiative teams, leadership team for program, and the program planning committee), broader organizational work teams (e.g., DEI, values, grant reporting refresh), and leadership.

These efforts helped evaluation and learning to become viewed as a core part of how we do our work. Staff now regularly seek out IA&L team members for support and drive many evaluation and learning practices themselves.

Phase 5: Maintenance and Renovations – Where We Are Now

The original refresh of the IA&L function occurred at a time of significant change at Irvine. That context presented a unique opportunity to reconsider our evaluation and learning approach, establish a new framework to guide Irvine's evaluation and learning efforts, translate this approach into practice, and embed evaluation and learning throughout the foundation. While we have made significant progress, there is continued opportunity to build on the groundwork that has been laid by planning for and addressing ongoing maintenance to prevent future problems. In addition to maintenance, it's just as important to recognize when a partial or full renovation may be needed. This idea was especially meaningful during the onset of the pandemic when we worked closely with initiative teams and our external consulting partners to adjust plans and priorities to align with new needs and concerns.

Currently, Irvine is entering a new season of its work. In response to external needs and opportunities, the foundation has increased its grantmaking and staffing. It is also working to clarify and operationalize its racial equity approach both internally and externally. Finally, the foundation is moving to a hybrid workplace after more than two years of virtual work due to the pandemic. Outside of Irvine, the broader fields of philanthropy and evaluation continue to evolve.

Funders are facing calls to make fundamental changes in how they work – to advance equity, to center trust, and to shift power – and there is increasing interest in participatory approaches to evaluation and learning as well as grantmaking.

Every change provides a chance to reflect on the design and use of the house we have built. We see opportunities to innovate and reinvent, to ask stakeholders how our house is fitting current needs and what changes we might make. These opportunities include revisiting our IA&L Framework and being more explicit about how equity shows up in our approach; ramping up our IA&L team's capacity to match growth in grantmaking; supporting efforts to onboard and train new staff; and leaning into cross-initiative goals and learning.

> *The Field Guide's* **Evaluation and Learning's Integral Role in Equity Efforts** deep dive (page 35) identifies three factors that influence the ability of evaluation and learning teams to support foundation-wide equity efforts. Leaders can use this framework to find starting points for supporting equity broadly within their organizations.

REFLECTION ON THE HOUSE – ITS BUILD AND USE

As we consider our future direction, it's also helpful to reflect on factors that contributed to success in the past. Below I share some key lessons I've taken from the build and use of the evaluation and learning function at Irvine that may be relevant to other evaluation and learning leaders.

Create a blueprint, but be open to evolving it.

Evaluation and learning functions are commonly pulled in multiple directions. Planning proactively and thoroughly can help you stay focused and manage expectations in light of limited resources. At the same time, it's important to retain flexibility and be responsive to emergent challenges and opportunities – you will need to adapt frequently! It's helpful to learn from peers at other foundations as you develop the blueprint. That said, there is no right answer or specific model to apply. Fundamentally, you are responsible for deciding what makes sense for your situation.

Consider evaluation and learning in the design of all aspects of the house.

Making sure that evaluation and learning is woven throughout the house in big, small, explicit, and implicit ways is critical.

This helps residents and visitors to experience and be supported by IA&L in different manners that may be more attuned to their personal preferences and needs (e.g., interacting informally by "sitting around the kitchen table" or taking a more formal approach "in the living room" for evaluation meetings).

Calibrate the build to priority needs and available resources.

There will always be tradeoffs in the design and use of the house when it comes to things like who manages what resources, how program and IA&L staff collaborate on external evaluations, and how teams are organized. Constant prioritization is needed. It is better to build slowly and well than go quickly, focusing on the short term only, and have significant problems later. Consider where it is best to spend more for a custom build vs. buying an IKEA prefab vs. engaging staff in a DIY project. Think about evaluation and learning staff roles and where a generalist or specialist is needed. Expect unknowns and plan for the fact that rolling out new activities or initiatives will almost always take longer than expected.

Seek resident input but recognize pleasing everyone is not possible.

Developing a well-fitting home means taking into account the interests and needs of everyone who will live and use the house. However, know that you will never be able to please everyone and solve the different tensions that can arise in this work. Where possible, it's helpful to design for flexible use that still maintains the overall function and purpose.

It's also important to be clear on what you are doing and why, to be helpful where you can and refer to others as possible, and to know where to lean in and use your voice particularly when straddling across different organizational levels. It can be hard for evaluation and learning leaders to accept that they can't make everyone happy given that so many evaluation and learning leaders value being of service to foundation colleagues; however, to accomplish our mission we must come to terms with this reality of the job.

Recognize the importance of less visible aspects of the house.

The visible aspects of the house tend to get the most attention and appreciation. However, the parts that can't be seen, such as the electricity, are key to the home's functionality and shouldn't be skimped or undervalued. Likewise, a significant portion of the evaluation and learning role takes place behind the scenes in support of others, which can make many evaluation and learning staff feel underappreciated. Evaluation and learning leaders and allies can address this tension by pointing out these benefits, recognizing builders and their contributions as well as others that are using the house in ways for which it was designed (e.g., lift up early adopters of evaluation and learning efforts).

Navigating competing goals and contrasting opinions is critical for E&L leaders. *The Field Guide's* **Managing Polarities** section (page 22-25) describes four common tensions E&L leaders regularly confront in their roles and supplies advice and examples for how to manage these.

Embrace the perpetual work in progress.

There is always a punch list of things that still need to be completed and different phases of the build usually overlap (e.g., designing one room while another needs a renovation). Understand and accept that the job is never done. The upside is that it doesn't get boring and there is always something new to design, renovate, or build! You may even find yourself needing to revisit and refresh some of the same processes over time. This cycle of continuous reflection and renewal is integral to the work and can often lead to new insights about where deeper attention is needed.

Lead with attention to the builder(s).

As a leader, I have a responsibility, both within Irvine and in the broader evaluation ecosystem, to ensure more evaluation leaders reflect the diverse perspectives and lived experiences of the communities we serve and to help these leaders thrive in their evaluation careers. One way I take on this responsibility is by striving to surface my own assumptions and biases so I can create safe spaces to listen to, acknowledge, and address challenges faced by the "builders" – our own staff and evaluators of color with whom we work. Awareness and open listening benefit other aspects of evaluation and learning, too. I have to be willing to take the initiative to chart the course, put a stake in the sand,

and lead the way into unknown territory – recognizing that it may work great, okay, or badly. The goal is to learn and keep going. It can be a slow build with lots of challenges and some bruises. It's important to be resilient, avoid taking things personally, and recognize that this is not a job for perfectionists (though recovering perfectionists are okay).

Embedding organizational learning practices that foreground equity, strategic adaptation, and collaborative inquiry is an ever-evolving journey along a path marked by twists and turns, high points and low points. Success requires time, patience, humility, and collaboration, along with a good deal of self-reflection and creativity. Overall, I have found it to be a rewarding endeavor filled with unique opportunities to contribute to equity and justice alongside caring and dedicated colleagues. I hope that sharing insights and lessons from this experience is helpful to other colleagues embarking on this journey and wish them well.

* * *