

QUICK QUESTION

How do you build in learning when there's no time to learn?

Results from a GrantCraft survey.

Time is a scarce commodity – a reality that's as true in foundations as in any organization. Grantmakers need to spend time wisely on activities that add value to their daily work and increase their ability to do good work in the future. By those criteria, learning ought to

get high priority, yet it's often the case that learning gets squeezed out when time gets short.

Does the trade-off between time and learning really need to be so stark? It shouldn't be, said GrantCraft readers. Not that time isn't an issue: it is. What matters is how people use time to learn and make sense of learning, individually and across a team or organization. As one respondent put it, "Work never ends, and so we need to learn to manage our time to include learning on the job."

We asked GrantCraft readers to tell us a little about how they think about time, and how they manage it. More than 1,400 responded to our survey. In the following pages, we summarize the lessons and tips they offered for building learning into the time available, even when time is in short supply.

Time: A Dimension of the "Building Blocks" for Learning

Is Yours a Learning Organization?, a Harvard Business Review article by Amy Edmondson and colleagues, describes three "building blocks" for establishing a learning organization:

1. a supportive learning environment
2. concrete learning processes and practices
3. leadership that reinforces learning

Time is an important factor in all three. A supportive learning environment has four characteristics – psychological safety, appreciation of differences, openness to new ideas, and time for reflection – each of which is compromised when time pressures are so great that relationships are constantly fraught. Concrete learning processes and practices take place in real time, and they're always in competition with other time-consuming tasks. As for leadership, leaders who reinforce learning are savvy about time; they know that time allocation says a lot about what (and who) gets valued in a meeting, a process, or a team.

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LESSON 1. Establish a culture of learning by building learning into routine processes.

To make time for learning when time is short, one grantmaker reported, “we have built learning into our routine procedures and habits. For example, site visits are always followed by team debriefings. We also try to discuss lessons learned even while we are engaged in a particular task or project.”

Some strategies for learning fit at particular points in the grantmaking process — early, middle, or late:

- “The planning process, including strategic planning, program conceptualization and design, and evaluation design and implementation, is entirely about learning. Learning isn’t the hard part: the trick is in figuring out which questions you need to be asking.”
- “Make research on new ideas a platform for learning. Research provides a learning opportunity that gives new ideas depth and helps build consensus for change.”
- “Build in opportunities for learning as you go. Sometimes there isn’t time to do a long reflection process at the end of a project, but there can surely be steps along the way where everyone takes time to observe the knowledge exchange that is happening.”
- “Do short ‘actions reviews’ rather than long drawn out evaluations in some instances; you will be amazed about the lessons that can emerge when you take a few minutes as a group to reflect on a collaborative activity.”
- “There is often a rush to incorporate recommendations (e.g., after an evaluation) into new plans. Add the step ‘sense-making’ and explicitly ask the questions, *What did this tell us? What did we learn? What would we have done differently with hindsight?*”

Opportunities for reflection take time, but they can also help a team manage time more effectively. “We carve out time each month to discuss what we are working on,” one grantmaker noted. “This is a good opportunity to really reflect on workload and discuss ways that tasks can be balanced so someone can take on a new challenge within the department.”

To keep learning from feeling like a burden, grantmakers at one foundation “build learning into each of our meetings as a 20-30 minute activity so it is ongoing and doesn’t become a one-day overload. We also build time in at the end of a learning event for debriefing, consolidation, and next steps before everyone is exhausted or has moved on to other commitments.” A foundation president asks board members to use part of their regular meeting “to reflect together about what they learned, heard, agreed, or disagreed with from the presentations. It’s become a really valued time together. We now use it at our staff meeting.”

LESSON 2. Raise the profile of learning by noticing when it happens and naming it explicitly.

Many people described learning as being as much a stance as a set of activities. “To think of a conversation as a learning opportunity doesn’t necessarily take more time,” said one. “Rather, it’s a different approach with different expectations.” Another explained that “on-the-job learning is a matter of asking questions and thinking about the purposes of policies and procedures — not just doing what’s always been done.” Be alert for learning, said some, and you’ll find it: “Much of what we learn is through osmosis — by being in the room when key folks in our focus area are discussing issues.”

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Some people recommended active questioning as a useful tactic. “Start and end meetings with questions like, ‘If there’s one thing you’d like to say to others doing a similar thing, what would it be?’ – in other words, quick things that force people to be analytical.” Or this: “Often times, learning comes from conversations that specifically ask the question, What did you learn? A lot can come from a five-minute conversation asking just that.”

One grantmaker told of “fostering a learning process” by making organizational assumptions explicit and testing them: “Two years ago, it was asserted that grantees appreciate the non-financial aspects of our support as much as or more than the financial. This led to an exercise through which we inventoried these non-financial services: advising on research design, access to knowledge and peers elsewhere, brokering contacts with potential audiences, etc. We then informally surveyed grantees on what they most value about contact with our organization.”

It may sound circular, but highlighting learning can also increase people’s appreciation for learning activities: “Refer back to what’s been learned and how it’s been helpful,” one person suggested, “so everyone appreciates better that the time spent was worthwhile.”

LESSON 3. Cultivate personal habits of learning that work for you.

A third category of time-conscious tips came from respondents who build little learning opportunities into their own daily routines. “I devote the first 15 minutes of my day to scanning field-specific news sources for relevant information,” said one. Another devotes an hour a day “to my own learning as directed by the board. This year I am learning more about the global economy.”

Email and the internet are inevitable parts of daily work life, and some respondents use them strategically for learning. “I do quick and dirty online research reviews,” one explained. “I like the blitz approach when I’m on topic.” One grantmaker encourages colleagues “to add a couple of lines as they forward along the myriad articles, clearly stating the gist of the article, how it applies to our work, and what they think of the point of view of the piece.” One person reflected, realistically, that “email dialogues can be helpful and fit into busy schedules easily. The clarity of the learning is not always top-notch, but I find it’s the main type I can carve into my day.”

Many readers use travel for learning that doesn’t happen as easily in the office. Here are a few tips:

- “I keep a binder of longer articles handy to review when I travel or have downtime, on a plane, in a hotel, etc.”
- “Find in-between times to reach out to colleagues. I try to call colleagues or write reflective letters when I am waiting at the airport between flights.”
- “We travel around the region and often make good use of long car rides to reflect and discuss new ideas.”
- “I drive to site visits a lot, so I use the time to drive to reflect and think about ideas to explore when the pace allows. It may be a small thing, but turning off the radio and focusing thought on the work can be useful.”
- “Use doubling up as a learning space. Take someone with you even when you could do it yourself.”

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Writing is also a source of learning. "I practice journaling my work experience to help me reflect over a period of time," one respondent explained. Another said this: "Write down questions! You can then find time to go back to things or you will pick up tips as you go that relate back to what you wanted to learn."

Many noted that relationships are a nexus of learning. "I watch and emulate people I admire," one grantmaker reported; another said, "I try to have relationships and conversations with people who are challenging and inspiring." "Never be afraid to ask a more knowledgeable person to clarify a point or explain something," urged one. Finally, this comment summed up the advice of many respondents: "I ask grantees a lot of questions to learn from their much closer vantage point."

LESSON 4. Try new activities – but choose wisely and keep things simple.

A lot of organizations seem to do well with voluntary activities such as brown-bag lunches or reading circles, designed to give staff members a chance to learn about new ideas, trends in the field, or the work of colleagues. "Time is always a challenge," said one respondent. "To help overcome it, we institutionalized some set-aside time for learning. For instance, we have a monthly book club-like discussion group session with recommended readings and discussion guides. Participation is voluntary, and reading choices are from our field. Another example is a support group for emerging leadership, our middle managers."

Sometimes new activities and routines produce disappointing results, no matter how well intentioned. "We tried to institute a 'day of reflection' that was required quarterly of staff to stop emails and appointments and read and discuss issues," said one grantmaker. "We were unable to sustain it because 'we couldn't afford the time,' according to staff." The search for learning can lead to stock solutions, one person warned, such as "create an intranet." The expectation is that staff will load good ideas, opportunities, events, best practices on there, but it just becomes a black hole. Avoid the intranet!"

We also heard from grantmakers and others who are puzzling over how best to convey learning to others. Some praised blogs or social media generally; one wrote, "We use an internal tool called Yammer (a Twitter-type tool) to help people share daily lessons quickly and informally." One grantmaker described trying to get better at "identifying products for different audiences (internal or external) to communicate evaluation findings, to take advantage of regular business moments and shape them for learning." Another bemoaned the habit of "putting everything we learn into reports. We write up reports and reports and reports, and pass them along to others, but when time is short a Word document just won't do. Training in itself won't cut it either, as trainings are often seen as one-off experiences."

In conclusion, one grantmaker had this to say about making a personal commitment to learning, despite the time it takes: "It's necessary to think deeply and choose wisely. Focus on one or two issues about which you feel strongly, and let others go. There is too much information out there to take it all on board. It's essential to keep learning, no matter how time-poor, otherwise your work risks becoming irrelevant or outdated, and you risk becoming stale or unmotivated. Each year, I choose to commit to one or two new projects and to following (reading, watching, engaging with) a new group of interesting people (colleagues, blogs, organizations, projects, writers). I think of this as 'my time,' a legitimate professional development activity, even though I'm not 'getting my work done.'"