The Nonprofit Nerd (June 2017)

The Nonprofit Institute at Portland State University

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In his widely-read book, *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge - a systems scientist at MIT's Sloan School of Management - outlined the five characteristics of the learning organization: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, individual accountabilities, and team learning.

If you're interested in learning more about learning organizations, NPI recommends you get to know [the Carnegie Commons Blog](https://www.carnegiecommons.org/) and [Infed.org](https://www.infed.org/), offered in partnership with Willamette Valley Development Officers and taught by Young Audiences of Oregon and Southwest.

The biggest learning moment for me was when I looked at the outcomes for the program that I was measuring. I realized that the program was not achieving what it set out to do, and the outcomes were not meaningful. This is such an important reminder. It's easy to narrow our focus and get stuck in our left brains.

Respected evaluator and organizational consultant Halle Preskill provides tips for creating a more effective evaluation practice. Here are a few of her thoughts:

**JF:** I agree: what's worth the time is what's going to get used, either by your recipients (grantees) or by your funders. I think we often spend a lot of time measuring things that aren't that meaningful. To me, an evaluation is about offering a clear answer to a question. So it's crucial to have a clear question to begin with.

**DV:** You both dug into some really interesting evaluation questions for your own organizations. What have you learned and how have you put these ideas into practice?

**JF:** I can't pretend that evaluation doesn't take a significant amount of time. But what I've learned is that it's crucial to really focus on what you want to measure and what you want to learn from it. The outcomes that are really important are those that are meaningful and that are going to have an impact on the people you're serving.

**DV:** Another challenge of arts evaluation is staying true to our outcomes. The culture and language of the arts do provide those benefits. But the outcomes that are often left out—beauty and joy and meaning—are real and important, and our community needs them. The challenge is not letting them be ignored.

**JF:** And I think that's where we need to start—by communicating clearly what we are trying to accomplish. Evaluation on both sides (funder and recipient) is necessary for continuous improvement strategies in their work. I learned that we shouldn't throw out the baby with the bathwater. It's a reality that we need to measure smaller-scale, yet still meaningful, outcomes. I learned that we shouldn't throw out the baby with the bathwater. It's a reality that we need to measure smaller-scale, yet still meaningful, outcomes. I learned that we shouldn't throw out the baby with the bathwater. It's a reality that we need to measure smaller-scale, yet still meaningful, outcomes. I learned that we shouldn't throw out the baby with the bathwater. It's a reality that we need to measure smaller-scale, yet still meaningful, outcomes. I learned that we shouldn't throw out the baby with the bathwater. It's a reality that we need to measure smaller-scale, yet still meaningful, outcomes.

**JF:** It's all about setting expectations, which cohort is right for you? Here are three things to consider:

1. The overview for each cohort is available [here](https://www.pdx.edu/nonprofit-institute).
2. For more information on the PCNPE cohort, Jonathan Frochtzwaig, Grants Coordinator at Portland State University | Mark O. Hatfield School of Government | Center for Public Service PO Box 7405, Portland, OR 97207-0751 US, [email](mailto:npi@pdx.edu) | [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/in/jonathan-frochtzwaig/)
3. For more information on the Measuring Equity Learning Cohort, [www.pdx.edu](https://www.pdx.edu), [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/)

**DV:** I can still remember how much I've learned from the great work of these fellow nerds! However, there are still challenges to overcome. What advice would you give to others who want to learn more about evaluation and how to make the most of it?

**JF:** I think the most important thing is to keep learning and keep growing. It's never too late to learn something new, and there's always something new to learn.

**DV:** I think that's true. It's important to stay curious and keep trying new things. And don't be afraid to ask for help. There are a lot of resources available to help you.

**JF:** Yes, and I think that's crucial. It's important to have a community of people who can support you and help you learn.

**DV:** What's next for you? Do you have any upcoming projects or events you're excited about?

**JF:** Yes! We're excited about our upcoming [annual conference on October 4th](https://www.pdx.edu/nonprofit-institute)

**DV:** Me too! And we're also excited to continue learning from our local and national friends.