



# **From Evaluation to Funding: Leveraging Program Data to Strengthen Grant Proposals**

A White Paper

**WhitworthKee, LLC**

June 2025

Recommended citation:

WhitworthKee, LLC. (2025, June). *From evaluation to funding: Leveraging program data to strengthen grant proposals* [White paper]. <https://www.whitworthkee.com>

## Executive Summary

In today's competitive funding environment, many organizations face increasing pressure to demonstrate not only strong program design but also a culture of learning and improvement. Funders are looking for more than an account of activities or participant numbers; they expect to see how organizations use evaluation to understand results and plan for future impact. Strategic use of evaluation findings can strengthen grant proposals by offering evidence of effectiveness and adaptability. Whether building a case for expanded funding or renewed partnership, organizations that can connect program data to their future plans often stand out in funder review processes.

This white paper offers practical guidance for using evaluation insights in applications for funding requests. It provides tools and templates for presenting data, addressing challenges, and demonstrating a clear capacity for learning. Organizations of any size can use these strategies to build more credible, compelling proposals that position them for sustained growth.

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## Introduction: Why Funders Value Evaluation-Based Narratives

In today's funding landscape, nonprofits face the challenge of articulating both their future plans and their past accomplishments in ways that resonate with funders. Funders are increasingly looking for a forward-thinking narrative that shows how the organization is assessing and understanding the impact of its programs and overall efforts. Funders want to see that organizations are using evaluation to determine what is working, adjust what is not, assess the impact of their programs and services, and strategically plan for greater effectiveness. Rather than expecting perfection, many funders prioritize organizations that are transparent, reflective, and grounded in evidence-informed decision-making.

Even modest forms of evaluation, such as participant feedback, outcome tracking, or informal reflections, can effectively demonstrate how an organization is learning and evolving. Integrating this kind of information into your proposals not only strengthens your credibility but also signals to funders that your organization is reflective, strategic, and committed to continuous improvement.<sup>3</sup>In short, evaluation is not just a reporting requirement; it is a strategic advantage.

This paper outlines simple, practical steps for nonprofits to use their program data more effectively in proposals, regardless of size or capacity. We recognize that nonprofits and small organizations often operate under tight resource constraints. Rather than suggesting a wholesale shift, this paper provides practical ways to leverage existing evaluation practices. We focus on how organizations can build grant narratives from the data and insights they already collect, even informally.

**Quick Tip:** In every section that follows, we include a "Low-Lift Action" callout to offer a simple first step that can be implemented with minimal time or cost. Whether seeking new funding or applying for renewal, organizations that integrate evaluation findings into their proposals show transparency, accountability, and responsiveness, which are qualities that can build funder confidence.

### LOW-LIFT ACTION

Choose one example that shows how your organization used data to adapt a program or approach. Write a brief paragraph that explains what changed and why. Use this in your next proposal to show your commitment to learning and impact.

# Preparing for Grant Readiness through Evaluation

While many organizations rely on formal evaluation reports produced at the end of a project cycle, funding proposals often require more nimble, up-to-date insights. A funder’s expectations for evaluation vary depending on the type of funding, but across sectors, there is growing interest in how organizations use data continuously, not just in retrospect.

Being “grant ready” means having systems in place to track, interpret, and communicate evaluation findings in ways that align with funder expectations. It also means maintaining the organizational habits that allow staff to draw on those findings when funding opportunities arise.

This does not require complex systems. It starts with intentional practices that create a steady flow of evaluation-informed insights:



Organizations that adopt these practices, like the ones shown in the graphic above, generally find it easier to respond to new funding opportunities with proposals grounded in current data.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, they strengthen the learning narrative,

<sup>1</sup> World Bank. (2020). *Ten steps to a results-based monitoring and evaluation system*. World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/f87d81cf-54e9-5a35-ab9e-dc24fc61f85a/content>

which is becoming increasingly appealing to funders with an interest in awarding grants to flexible, forward-thinking partners.

## Common Funder Expectations for Evaluation

Funders approach evaluation with varying levels of formality and standard evaluation practices, depending on the type of funding, grant size, and the funding organization's goals. However, across federal, foundation, and corporate funding streams, there are shared expectations that organizations should understand and be ready to address.

At a minimum, funders expect to see how an organization tracks progress and outcomes. Increasingly, they also expect to see evidence that the organization learns from its data and uses evaluation insights to refine and improve its programs.<sup>2</sup> Even when outcomes fall short of articulated benchmarks, what often matters most is how organizations explain those results and what they plan to do next.

Table 1 summarizes typical expectations across different types of funders.

**Table 1: Funder Expectations**

Funder Type	Common Expectations
Federal Agencies	Logic models or theories of change; outcome metrics; disaggregated data; formal evaluation reports; use of findings to inform future work <sup>3</sup>
Private Foundations	Outcome and impact data; clear alignment with foundation priorities; stories of participant experience; demonstration of learning and adaptation <sup>4</sup>
Corporate Funders	Alignment with corporate values; short-term outcomes; employee engagement or community visibility; concise reporting of results <sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> GeoFunders. (2023). *Where should we start in using evaluation as a tool for learning?* <https://www.geofunders.org/resource/where-should-we-start-in-using-evaluation-as-a-tool-for-learning/>

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2021). *Program evaluation: Key terms and concepts* (GAO-21-404SP). <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-404sp>

<sup>4</sup> Hack, C. (2024). *Outputs and outcomes: What nonprofit reporting means to donors*. National Philanthropic Trust. <https://www.nptrust.org/philanthropic-resources/philanthropist/outputs-and-outcomes-what-nonprofit-reporting-means-to-donors/>

<sup>5</sup> Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose®. (2023). *Giving in Numbers™: 2023 edition*. <https://cecp.co/download-pdfform/?pdfink=wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Giving-in-Numbers-2024.pdf>

No matter the type of funder, the ability to show how evaluation findings have influenced future plans is viewed positively. Even when projects encounter challenges, organizations that communicate transparently and demonstrate a learning mindset are often viewed as stronger candidates for continued or expanded funding. A learning mindset involves reflecting on outcomes, making data-informed adjustments, and applying lessons to strengthen future efforts.

## LOW-LIFT ACTION



### **Match your outcomes to a recent RFP.**

Choose one funding opportunity your team is considering. Read the RFP's evaluation language, and highlight where your current outcomes align. Save this as a quick-reference doc for your next proposal.

## Using Evaluation Findings to Strengthen Grant Proposals

For many organizations, evaluation reports and funding proposals have traditionally served distinct purposes. Evaluation reports are often produced to fulfill accountability requirements once a grant-funded project is underway or completed, while proposals are developed to secure new or renewed funding. However, when used strategically, evaluation findings can serve as a powerful bridge between what an organization has accomplished and what it plans to achieve in the future.

Proposals that integrate evaluation findings in a thoughtful way tend to stand out in competitive review processes. These proposals show that the organization tracks outcomes, reflects on them, and adjusts its work based on what it learns. This signals to funders that the organization is adaptive, responsive, and focused on continuous improvement.<sup>6</sup>

The most effective proposals do not attempt to present all data. Instead, they focus on evaluation insights that are directly relevant to the funding request and demonstrate thoughtful use of evidence. These insights may include:

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<sup>6</sup> Hassel, H., & Cedergren, A. (2025). *Facing the unexpected: A literature review on methods for assessing organizational adaptive capacity*. Environment Systems and Decisions. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10669-025-10017-2>

- **Evidence of positive outcomes** that align with funder priorities
- **Lessons learned** during implementation that inform future planning
- **Program changes** made in response to evaluation findings
- **Opportunities for growth** or innovations identified through data review

Even when evaluation results are mixed, organizations can frame findings constructively in a way that facilitates continuous learning and adaptability. Funders often view an honest discussion of challenges and an explanation of how the organization has responded as a positive indicator of organizational maturity. A well-crafted narrative can demonstrate how the organization has improved its strategies, deepened its impact, or expanded its capacity over time, rather than simply reporting what was done in the past.

By using evaluation findings in a more intentional and tailored way, organizations create funding proposals that are more compelling, credible, and grounded in evidence. This approach helps to secure current grants and strengthens long-term relationships with funders that value learning and accountability.

LOW-LIFT ACTION



**Draft one “What We Learned” paragraph.** Use a past evaluation report or reflection meeting to write a short paragraph that includes: (1) what was measured, (2) what was learned, and (3) how the program changed. This becomes ready-to-use proposal language.

## Templates and Tools for Translating Data into Grant Narratives

For many organizations, one of the challenges in using evaluation data effectively is knowing how to present them in ways that resonate with funders. Large reports may be useful for internal review or formal compliance, but funders often prefer concise, accessible formats that show clear connections between evaluation findings and future plans.

Clear, user-friendly templates can help organizations present evaluation insights more effectively within funding proposals. These tools can be adapted for different funder audiences and tailored to match the style and structure of individual grant applications.

The following examples illustrate three practical ways to frame evaluation data in funding proposals:

**Table 2: Practical Templates for Using Evaluation Data in Proposals**

1. Framing Evaluation Findings		
What We Measured	What We Learned	How We Are Adapting
Clearly state evaluation focus areas (outputs, outcomes, participant feedback)	Summarize key findings, both positive and negative	Describe changes to be made, new strategies to be tested, or elements to be scaled
2. Incorporating Data into Impact Stories		
Outcome	Supporting Data	Beneficiary Voice (Optional)
State clear outcomes achieved	Include key insights from your evaluation (quantitative, qualitative, or both). External data can be added for context if relevant.	Integrate participant quotes or community stories for human context
3. Linking Evaluation to Future Funding Requests		
Past Evaluation Finding	Planned Future Activity	Funding Need
Identify insights that support expansion or change	Describe proposed action informed by data	Link to specific budget items in the proposal.

**Disclaimer:** The examples provided in this table are conceptual templates designed to help organizations organize their evaluation data. Always follow the specific formatting, structure, and content requirements outlined by each funder.

Templates like these help organizations move beyond sharing results in isolation and instead connect evaluation findings directly to future funding requests. This helps funders understand how the organization learns from its work, adapts over time, plans for sustained impact, and how the dollars, if awarded, will contribute to that impact.

## Addressing Challenges and Demonstrating Organizational Learning

It is a common misconception that only positive findings should be included in funding proposals. In reality, many funders expect organizations to be transparent about challenges and setbacks.<sup>7</sup> What matters most is how the organization frames

<sup>7</sup> Brest, P., & Harvey, H. (2021). *Money well spent: A strategic plan for smart philanthropy*. Stanford PACS. <https://pacscenter.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Money-Well-Spent-8.5x11-Book.pdf>

these results and demonstrates a thoughtful, constructive response. In fact, unanticipated or less-than-ideal findings often lead to the most valuable learning. These results can point to opportunities to improve service delivery, sharpen program focus, or refine evaluation methods. Acknowledging and reflecting on these insights not only strengthens internal strategy but also signals to funders that the organization is adaptive and growth-oriented.

When organizations openly acknowledge areas where outcomes did not fully meet expectations and provide a clear explanation of how the organization is learning and adapting, they in turn build funder trust. More specifically, this signals that the organization has a culture of reflection and is committed to improving its work over time.

## LOW-LIFT ACTION



### Practice writing about a challenge.

Choose one result that didn't meet expectations. Write 2–3 sentences explaining what happened, what you learned, and how you adjusted. Save this for future use in proposals that ask about learning or setbacks.

The following principles can help organizations frame negative or mixed findings in ways that strengthen their proposals:

- **Transparency:** Acknowledge areas where outcomes did not meet expectations.
- **Context:** Provide insight into external factors or limitations that may have influenced results.
- **Learning:** Explain what has been learned and how this will shape future results.
- **Commitment:** Describe the organization's ongoing process of reflection, adaptation, and continuous improvement.

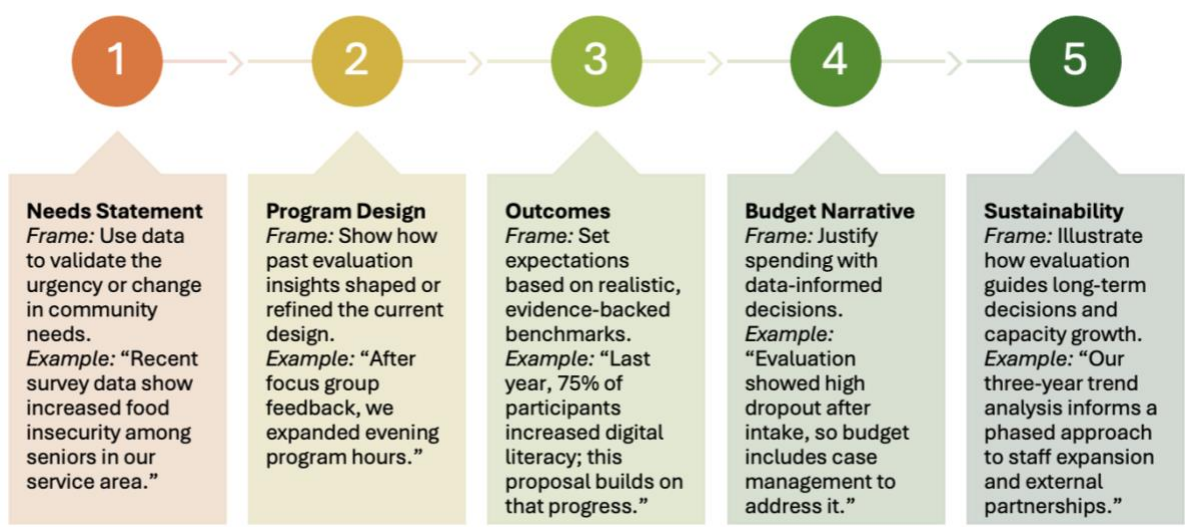
Handled in this way, negative findings can position an organization as a thoughtful, reflective, responsive, and adaptive partner. Funders increasingly recognize that work that focuses on meaningful social change involves complex challenges. They often value organizations that can reflect honestly on their work and evolve in response to both successes and setbacks.

## Tips for Weaving Evaluation Throughout a Proposal

Too often, evaluation findings are isolated in one section of a proposal or appended as separate data tables. A stronger approach is to weave evaluation insights throughout the proposal narrative. This helps reviewers see that evaluation is an integral part of the organization's culture and decision-making, not an afterthought.

By consistently referencing evaluation findings across multiple sections of a proposal, organizations can reinforce the story of how they learn, adapt, and plan for the future. This approach also demonstrates alignment with funder priorities, which increasingly value learning and accountability.<sup>8</sup>

Key opportunities to incorporate evaluation insights throughout a proposal include:



Incorporating evaluation insights across the full proposal helps funders see that the organization is responsive, learning-driven, and well-positioned to meet evolving community needs.

## Practical Next Steps for Building a Stronger Funding Narrative

For many organizations, the first step toward a stronger funding narrative is to view evaluation findings as more than just reporting obligations. Instead of treating them as paperwork for closing out a grant, these insights can be used proactively to build a case for future funding. With some intentional planning, evaluation data can become an asset that improves not only proposals but also internal learning and communication.

<sup>8</sup> Center for Evaluation Innovation. (2021). *Shifting the evaluation paradigm: The equitable evaluation framework*. <https://measureresults.issueab.org/resources/38241/38241.pdf>

Organizations that want to integrate evaluation more strategically into their funding proposals can begin with these practical steps:

1. **Review recent evaluation findings alongside funder priorities to identify strong alignment—or potential gaps.** This helps ensure proposals highlight the most relevant data and can inform decisions about whether a funding opportunity is a good fit.
2. **Develop internal templates** (see Table 2) for summarizing evaluation data for funding audiences and staff involved in proposal development.
3. **Engage program staff and leadership** to ensure data-informed stories reflect on-the-ground realities.
4. **Compile and maintain an “evaluation highlights” document** with up-to-date outcome data, key insights, and short examples to streamline proposal development across teams.
5. **Schedule periodic reviews of evaluation narratives** to ensure proposals stay fresh, relevant, and compelling.

As these practices become routine, organizations will find it easier to develop compelling, data-informed proposals and to demonstrate a learning culture that appeals to many funders. Regardless of the funding outcome, requesting a debrief from funders can also provide valuable insight to strengthen how evaluation findings are framed in future proposals.

## LOW-LIFT ACTION

### Start an Evaluation Highlights

**document.** Begin tracking key outcomes and stories in a running document. Aim for one bullet point per month. This “evergreen” content can be reused and tailored for many different funding proposals.

## Building an Evaluation Culture: Beyond Compliance

In many organizations, evaluation is sometimes undervalued, viewed as a reporting task instead of a strategic asset.”<sup>9</sup> Many organizations complete reports because they must, not because they don't value evaluation, but because limited time, staffing, or resources make it hard to do more than what's required.

However, organizations that treat evaluation as a core learning process, not just an external requirement, can unlock far greater value from their data. These

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<sup>9</sup> Center for Evaluation Innovation. (2017). *Benchmarking evaluation in foundations: Do we know what we're doing?* <https://evaluationinnovation.org/publication/benchmarking-evaluation-in-foundations/>

organizations are more likely to produce funding proposals that stand out because they are rooted in a genuine commitment to reflection and adaptation.

Building an evaluation culture starts with leadership. Senior staff and board members should model an interest in learning from results, even when those results point to challenges or areas needing improvement. It also involves integrating evaluation into day-to-day decision-making, not limiting it to formal reporting cycles.

Key elements of a strong evaluation culture include:

- **Demonstrating a commitment** to using data from **Leadership** (both quantitative *and* qualitative) for improvement, not just compliance.
- **Sharing of evaluation findings** across staff levels and departments on a regular basis.
- **Encouraging reflection and dialogue** about what is working and what is not.
- **Celebrating learning and growth opportunities** as well as successes, so staff feel encouraged to identify needed changes.
- **Incorporating evaluation insights** into planning, budgeting, and proposal development.

When these practices are in place, evaluation data become a strategic asset.<sup>10</sup> They strengthen not only individual proposals but also the organization's overall ability to improve programs, respond to community needs, and build long-term relationships with funders.

## Conclusion: Creating a Culture of Learning and Adaptation

When organizations consistently use evaluation findings to shape funding proposals, they do more than secure individual grants. Over time, they build a reputation as thoughtful, adaptive partners who are committed to learning and continuous improvement.

This approach demonstrates not only what the organization delivers but also how it evolves to better meet community needs. In an environment where funders

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<sup>10</sup> Results for America. (2024). *Evaluation policy guide: Building evidence-driven cultures in organizations*. <https://results4america.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/LEVER-Evaluation-Policy-Guide.pdf>

increasingly prioritize sustainability and long-term impact, this can become a key differentiator.<sup>11</sup>

A strong funding narrative, grounded in evaluation insights, positions organizations to attract new resources, deepen relationships with funders, and expand their impact over time.

At WhitworthKee, we help mission-driven organizations turn evaluation insights into stronger funding proposals and long-term strategy. Our team partners with organizations to map evaluation findings to funder priorities, create internal templates for summarizing data, and craft compelling narratives that highlight learning and impact. We also support teams in integrating staff perspectives, developing reusable content, and strengthening evaluation culture over time. To learn more about how we can help your organization use program data to drive funding success, visit [whitworthkee.com](http://whitworthkee.com) or contact us at [info@whitworthkee.com](mailto:info@whitworthkee.com).

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<sup>11</sup> Bridgespan Group. (2025, February 19). *A practical guide to nonprofit measurement, evaluation, and learning*. <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/nonprofit-organizational-effectiveness/a-practical-guide-to-nonprofit-measurement-evaluation-and-learning>

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