Stories of Early Impact

What does Emergent Learning make possible?

Change, like learning, does not happen in the abstract. It happens because of an action we take that creates a possibility for something different to happen. These small "micro-moves" are like creating building blocks or a small opening that can be nurtured into something larger. This is a story of an Emergent Learning action and what that made possible.

A story from: Rebecca Ochtera (2019), Caring for Denver

Featured Practice: After Action Reviews

Featured Principle: Making Thinking Visible

What happened?

We have a learning cycle for the organization, based in Emergent Learning, that helps hold ourselves accountable to implementing our strategic plan and learning how to work as an organization, versus as siloed teams. Teams are assigned "priorities" from the strategic plan that they are responsible for implementing. At the end of the month, each team meets with me to do an AAR around their strategic plan work and we record progress, barriers, facilitators, insights, and next steps. They use this time for reflecting and also thinking about how to adapt for continuing or improving progress the next month (i.e., are we doing things right). There's also space to just talk about gut instincts and bigger picture things coming up (i.e. are we doing the right things). We have an all-team meeting at the beginning of the next month where each team shares out from their AAR. We keep a slide deck online where, as teams are talking, other team members write in thoughts — what they'd like to hear more about, where they see overlap or possible connections, etc. At the end of the meeting we review that slide deck and plan topics/facilitators for the rest of the weekly team meetings that month.

What difference did it make? (Early Impact)

Light bulbs go off in those AARs. Some examples: We recognized that multiple teams were interested in convening grantees; our Executive Director formed a sub-committee to think through what it would look like from the foundation lens. We recognized the need to collaborate between the community engagement team, which is responsible for collecting stories from grantees, and the Program Officers, who are monitoring grantee progress. The two teams pointed to the importance of working together so it's not overwhelming for grantees. Two teams working on identifying the "line of sight" for applications/grant making realized that both were working on this during a share out and identified how learning more from each other about their processes would be helpful next step to avoid duplicating efforts.

A new staff member asked about After Action Reviews and examples of what's come of them. Her boss said "you are the example." AARs over several months had revealed a component of the work that was uncovered by anyone's job description, so this new person who asked for an example was the person who was hired to support it.

What insights do you have?

Those conversations are making thinking explicit across the organization. Because staff have time to reflect and talk out loud as a group, it helps them build muscles around what is important to pay attention to related to their own team's success, but it also helps them see how what they are doing impacts, supports, and even sometimes contradicts what others are doing. As a start up organization, being intentional about creating space for sharing is important. The team's success isn't the end goal — the organization's success is the end goal. These conversations build awareness and the opportunity to bring the organization back into focus as the priority. Also, framing it as Emergent Learning practice creates the space to get curious rather than feeling ownership or blaming — a way to say "I want to learn more about..." versus "Why are you doing x? That's my job..."