Mountain of Accountability:

Pursuing mission through learning, exploration and development

A joint report by
Michael Quinn Patton & Blandin Foundation

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Vibrant. Rural. Community.

About the authors

This report is the result of collaborative work between Blandin Foundation staff and trustees, with Michael Quinn Patton.

Blandin Foundation

Blandin Foundation is an independent, private foundation based in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. Blandin Foundation works for vibrant rural Minnesota communities by investing in community leaders and working with partners to expand opportunity for all residents. It is one of only a handful of foundations in the United States focused exclusively on rural communities and the largest rural-based private foundation in Minnesota. Information on Blandin Foundation grantmaking, community leadership training programs and public policy initiatives are available at www.blandinfoundation.org

Michael Q. Patton

Michael Patton is an independent evaluation consultant with 40 years of experience conducing evaluations, training evaluators, and writing about ways to make evaluation useful. He is former president of the American Evaluation Association and author of several books on evaluation, including Essentials of Utilization-Focused Evaluation (2012).

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Since 2007, Blandin Foundation has committed itself to building an organization-wide assessment system that contributes to improved performance and adaptation to a changing world. Blandin Foundation's journey in pursuit of mission through learning, exploration and development is well summarized by an observation by Kathleen Enright, CEO of Grantmakers for Effective Organizations:

> "Philanthropy still has a way to go before it can deliver on the true promise of evaluation to drive learning and deliver better results for organizations and the communities they serve. The challenge for grantmakers is to weave evaluation into the fabric of what they do every day, and to shift the focus of this work so it's about improvement, not just proof."

In 2013, Blandin Foundation engaged evaluation expert and author Michael Q. Patton to take its assessment work to a new level. Together we explored how the field of "developmental assessment" might strengthen the work of the foundation, and how all of the various assessments at play might work together.

A simple graphic has come to be valuable in understanding and describing what is, admittedly, a complex system. Blandin Foundation's Mountain of Accountability© summarizes its three levels of accountability, and the interconnections among them. The journey to the summit (mission fulfillment) begins in the foothills of basic accountability. From there, the ascent leads up to the middle of the mountain where more complexity and commitment is involved. The final level leading to the summit, with its holistic and comprehensive panorama, offers no pre-set trail. This is first-ascent territory, where the conditions along the route and what has been learned along the way combine to inform further learning and guide the way to the summit.

Upward arrows along the left side show that routine data inform higher level inquiry, and downward feedback arrows along the right side show that what is learned at the top informs strategies and actions at the lower levels (e.g., that reflective practice informs future strategic planning and operations management).

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Level One

Basic Accountability

The first level of accountability focuses on fundamentals and answers two basic questions:

1. Did we implement our work as planned and authorized?
2. Did we meet basic quality standards in carrying out our work?

Answering these basic questions involves the following kinds of assessments:

- Financial audits
- Investment returns
- Staff performance management and assessment
- Basic management information systems reports
- Routine grantee reporting
- Community trend indicators for planning
- Basic program evaluations – who attended, how many, etc.
- Adherence to government and legal oversight

This first level of accountability assesses the extent to which resources are well-managed by adhering to generally accepted accounting standards, wise and astute portfolio management, quality personnel management practices, systematic grantmaking and program processes, implemented with due diligence and professionalism, that meet demands for public accountability and reporting. In classic logic model terminology, basic accountability focuses on inputs, activities, processes, and outputs. The data for basic accountability should be embedded in fundamental management processes. Basic accountability data support ongoing management decision-making and inform Board oversight.

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2 **Level Two**

Accountability for Impact

Once basic accountability processes and assessment reporting are in place, more specialized accountability assessments are possible, appropriate, and necessary to take programmatic effectiveness assessment to the next level. By assessing program and organizational outcomes and impacts, impact and effectiveness accountability answers three important and challenging questions:

1. To what extent are we building strong, positive relationships with key stakeholders and partners?
2. To what extent and in what ways are we attaining desired and intended program outcomes and impacts?
3. What are we learning, and in what ways are we applying what we are learning to improve effectiveness?

These are more specialized accountability questions because answering them requires data that go beyond what can be generated by basic internal management and monitoring information. More specific assessment work is necessary, which includes:

- Major program evaluations
- External strategic plan evaluation
- Board survey & feedback
- Program Participant Surveys
- Grantee Perception Report on Foundation relationships and perceived effectiveness
- Synthesis of grantees' reports on impacts
- Public perception studies
- Employee surveys

While the first level of basic accountability assesses the extent to which resources and processes are well-managed and of high quality, the second more advanced level assesses what differences the Foundation is making. As with basic accountability, the Foundation has multiple sources of data that document a broad range of positive impacts in the communities it serves.

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3 **Level Three**

Accountability for Learning, Development, and Adaptation

While the second level of accountability does an excellent job of evaluating at the program level and getting feedback from specific stakeholder groups, the third level takes on complexity and dynamic systems change, both in the Foundation's internal operations and in the Foundation's external initiatives, to bring about community change. At this level, "developmental evaluation" is utilized and the focus is on learning to adapt strategy, systems change, mission fulfillment, principles, and values.

Developmental evaluation is an approach that specifically supports innovation and adaptation through systems thinking and complexity science understandings. While traditional evaluation approaches (middle of the mountain) focus on improving and making decisions about projects and programs, developmental evaluation addresses strategy implementation and effectiveness at the overall organization and mission fulfillment levels.

Developmental evaluation integrates accountability, improvement and ongoing development with particular attention to changes in the organization's environment (for example, economic, social, demographic, policy, and technological changes) that affect strategic adjustments. Such an assessment approach supports adaptation and innovation through reflective practice.

The major assessment questions for learning and development are:

1. How are the world and the systems we work in changing, and how do we understand those changes so as to learn, adapt, and develop?
2. What does it mean to take our strategic framework seriously and inquire deeply into its elements and their implications for how we do our work and the impacts we have?
3. What are the interrelationships and interconnections between and among our diverse stakeholders and partners?
4. To what extent do the many and diverse parts of the Blandin Foundation constitute a coherent and aligned whole?

These questions are particularly challenging because they don't yield simple answers. Nor is the process of arriving at answers simple. The questions are often called

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"wicked" because inquiry into them is a journey of cumulative insights and adaptations rather than pound-the-fist-on-the table-with-certainty answers. But the increasing evidence from high-performing organizations is that the willingness to take on these wicked questions generates important insights and actionable learning that increase effectiveness and impact.

Accountability for Learning & Development involves:

- Deep reflective practice
- Developmental evaluation
- Strategic evaluation
- Focusing on systems change, innovation, adaptation, and making a difference in complex, dynamic systems

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Interconnections among the three levels of accountability

Each of the three levels can be defined categorically and implemented specifically – and that is what most foundations and organizations do. They generate a series of separate and discrete assessments.

In contrast, the challenge – and opportunity – when seriously engaged in accountability for learning and development is to see, understand, and use the findings from three levels to inform each other.

- Findings from basic accountability assessments inform program evaluation priorities and questions.
- Findings from program evaluations provide the case data to ask deeper, more strategic questions in reflective practice when looking for patterns across cases, across programs, across stakeholder groups, and across communities.
- Knowledge gained from reflective practice is used to inform future strategic planning as well as ongoing learning and adaptation.
- Program-level impacts are synthesized to examine changes at the community and system levels.
- Effectiveness of basic operations and support services within the Foundation are used to understand basic operations and support services among grantees. The ways in which basic operations and support services contribute to outcomes and impacts become part of the larger systems inquiry.

Share your thoughts and experiences related to the Mountain of Accountability at Blandin Foundation's website here:
http://blandinfoundation.org/who-we-are/accountability

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