

8.4 Creating a Culture of Learning

Fostering change in your organization or partnership begins with creating a culture that is fueled by learning and continuous improvement. Small changes may occur organically due to motivated individuals who take initiative to modify their approach. However, bigger changes may involve altering the way your organization or partnership does its work —perhaps moving away from familiar landowner engagement strategies or even shifting staff duties or landscape priorities. This requires investment and buy-in from many people and a willingness to change the existing systems and processes.

Developing this buy-in takes time and trust, but involving partners in the exploration of findings and brainstorming ways to integrate the findings often result in a deeper level of commitment to apply these learnings to future work. Understanding how the findings are relevant to the individual organization and the partnership also helps contribute to buy-in.

Here are a few strategies to consider to help build this buy-in in your own organization or partnership.

- Infuse evaluative thinking into your workflow. Involve partners in determining the learning questions for a given project, share relevant findings promptly and in a format that is useful to partners, and involve them in the interpretation of the findings and decisions about what should be done differently in the future ([see Section 8.3: Harvesting Learnings and Adapting Your Work](#)). Ensure planning timelines allow evaluation efforts and data to inform next steps.
- Establish open communication processes and be transparent about how decisions are made. Trust is a key element for change. Encourage partners to discuss roadblocks and lessons learned, and to share the challenges they face. This allows all partners to learn from each other and support each other, and helps the partnership ensure forward movement.

- Identify people in the group who encourage trial and error and challenge a business-as-usual environment. Nurture them to become champions for improvement and innovation, pushing the group to have a greater impact. Their ideas may be risky or challenging, but they can also deepen and broaden the discussion to yield new insights and strategies. Even if their ideas are not adopted, these individuals can help other people feel more comfortable with uncertainty and more open to new approaches.
- Accept that innovation carries the risk of failure. Help everyone in the partnership to understand that it is acceptable to try new things, some of which will not create the anticipated results. As long as those ideas are incorporating the best knowledge you have, and you are able to gather learnings from any failures, you can continue to improve.
- Ensure the ideas and decisions of the group are captured and shared with the group. This could be done as informally as posting a list for everyone to see at the end of a meeting. At future planning meetings, the decisions can be revisited and incorporated. It is often helpful to have the person responsible for the evaluation present at planning meetings to provide any needed context around the decisions and remind everyone why they were made.

With an attitude of continuous learning, you will find many opportunities to identify questions, collect information, and incorporate lessons. As you track your effort and interactions with landowners over time, each campaign becomes an opportunity to hone future work. When something does work, when you find a new shortcut on the Ladder of Engagement, or a landowner resource that really boosts adoption of a stewardship practice, share it. Also share your results when you try something that doesn't work—that is also helpful for others. We're all working toward better conservation and stewardship, and the more we can share lessons and inspiration with each other, the more efficient we all can be, and the faster we will reach those big landscape goals.