



TAKING STOCK: PROGRESS ON THE THEORY OF CHANGE

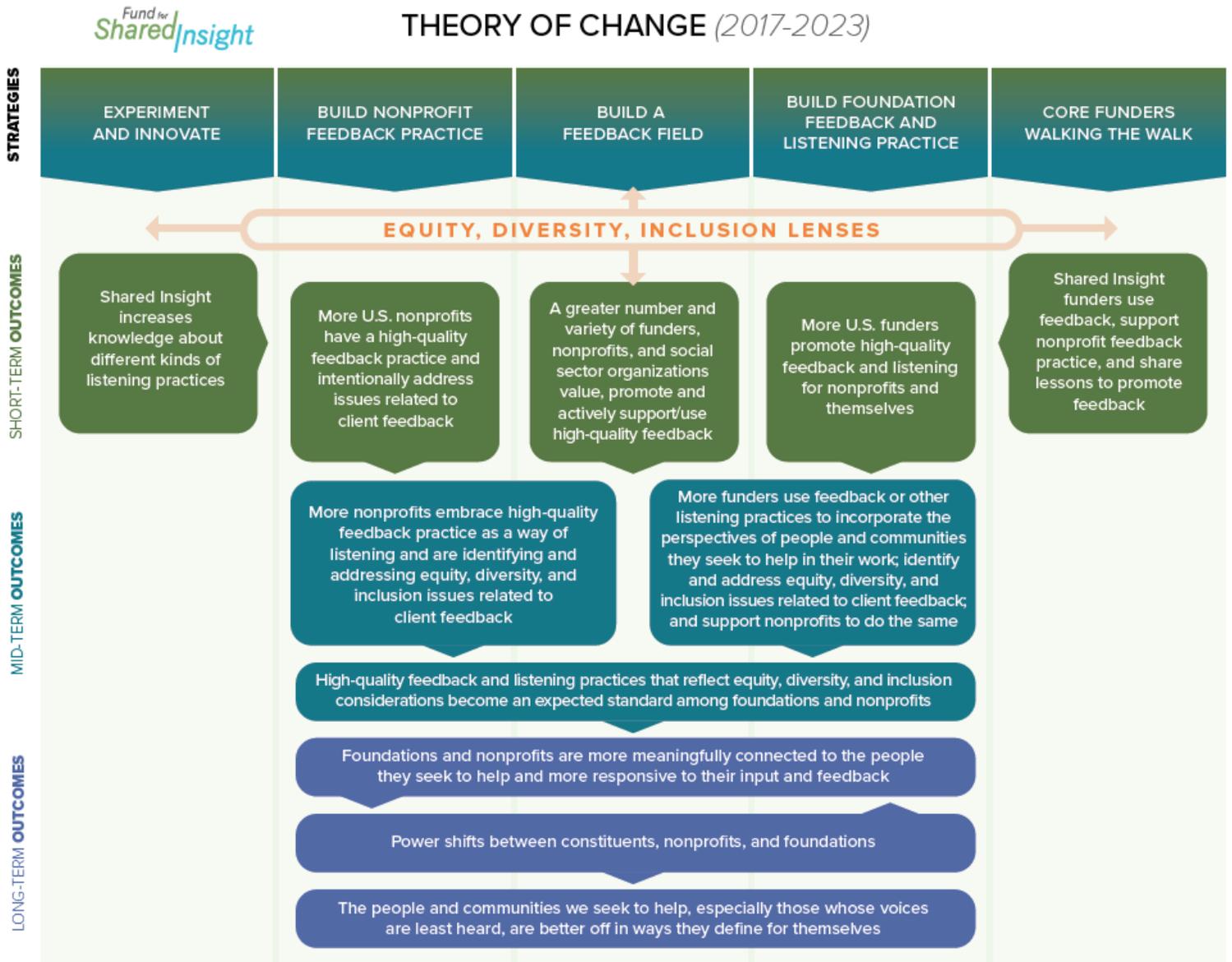
FUND FOR SHARED INSIGHT

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In 2014, Fund for Shared Insight (Shared Insight) began its work to improve philanthropy through collective funding for feedback practice, feedback research, and foundation listening and sharing. Since then, Shared Insight has further refined its mission and strategy, which it articulated in a new theory of change in early 2018. This new theory of change (Figure 1) reflects a shift in mission and strategies, as Shared Insight focuses efforts on ensuring that communities and people that foundations and nonprofits seek to help, especially those whose voices are least heard, are better off in ways they define for themselves. To achieve this goal, Shared Insight implemented five strategies while focusing on equity, diversity, and inclusion: 1) build the feedback field, 2) build nonprofit feedback practices, 3) build foundation feedback and listening practices, 4) experiment and innovate, and 5) core funders walk the walk. Shared Insight staff developed a more detailed theory of change document that identified key implementation markers and outcomes as a management tool to assess progress over time.

As Shared Insight's evaluation and learning partner, ORS Impact has continuously used Shared Insights' theory of change as an evaluation tool to facilitate collective learning and inform decision making. As part of its evaluation work, ORS Impact reviewed Shared Insight's progress in the last 18 months and assessed progress against implementation markers and outcomes identified in the updated theory of change. Using secondary data from multiple sources within Shared Insight, along with interviews with key staff members, ORS Impact leveraged its deep knowledge of Shared Insight's work and its position as an outside party to hold up the mirror and provide a high-level assessment of progress to date. This report summarizes the analysis process, key takeaways, and considerations for Shared Insight moving forward.

Figure 1 | Shared Insight’s updated theory of change graphic



For more information about our Theory of Change visit fundforsharedinsight.org

METHODOLOGY

To assess progress against the theory of change’s 55 implementation markers and short-term outcomesⁱ across the five strategies, we collected secondary data from Shared Insight’s management and communications teams and from the Listen4Good (L4G) team. We also conducted interviews with key staff members from each of these teams and with Shared Insight’s equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) consultant. Finally, we used our own observations and knowledge from attending core funder meetings and other related meetings and events.

Through this process, we realized that most indicators did not have targets of progress assigned, making it difficult to provide an objective assessment. To mitigate any one person’s bias and potentially subjective assessment, three different ORS Impact staff members who have deep knowledge about Shared Insight rated each marker and outcome separately using a rating scheme that we have used in similar past assessments (Table 1). The raters then held a collective analysis session to discuss ideas and develop a final rating for each marker, outcome, and overall strategy. In addition to rating progress of the five strategies, we assessed progress in embedding EDI lenses across Shared Insight’s work and approach and considered additional emergent activities or changes that have developed over time in each strategy.

Table 1 | Rating scheme for 2019 theory of change assessmentⁱⁱ

Rating	Criteria
4 On Track	Data suggest the cumulative effect of activities have or will result in meeting the implementation marker/outcome as expected by June 2020.
3 Slightly Off Track, Trending Up	Data suggest that an implementation marker will only be partially met or not achieved to the originally desired extent, but additional work shows promise.
2 Slightly Off Track	Data suggest that an implementation marker will only be partially met or not achieved to the originally desired extent.
1 Off Track	Data suggest that the implementation marker will not be achieved.

Strengths and Limitations

The practice of taking stock and using the theory of change as a basis for learning and adaptation is valuable. For some implementation markers, we were able to triangulate across data sources and make a judgement against an established target for desired progress. In many cases, however, our judgement was necessarily subjective and often reliant on information from a single data source or point of view. While we triangulated across knowledgeable analysts to mitigate some of this risk, we acknowledge that assessment of progress could be debated and seen differently from varying points of view. Regardless of this limitation, we feel that this point-in-time rough outside assessment can provide a useful reflection point and opportunity to review and refine expectations of progress going forward.

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

In general, we found positive progress throughout Shared Insight’s theory of change, with four of the five strategies either on target or trending upward. However, the strategy to build foundation practices is slightly off track, and two other areas’ progress feels tenuous and at risk without continued attention and support. In addition, we found that the process to embed EDI lenses throughout Shared Insight’s work and approach is strong. Table 2 shows overall ratings for the five strategies and EDI efforts, along with summary assessments. The remainder of this report provides more details on each strategy’s rating and rationale. An addendum listing all implementation markers and short-term outcomes with corresponding ratings is available as an optional reading.

Table 2 | Overall ratings for theory of change strategies with corresponding assessments

Strategy	Rating	Assessment
Build a feedback field	4*	Since 2018, there has been more focus on field building through strong communications and EDI focus, and greater agreement about what it takes to build the field. There are still questions about the field’s boundaries and Shared Insight’s role in driving progress. Progress is at risk of stagnating or falling off track without continued intentional focus.
Build non-profit feedback practice	4	There has been further development of L4G’s co-funded model and a new web-based app. The co-funded model shows consistent impact over time; the web platform’s optimization is underway, but its effectiveness is still unknown. There is a stronger internal and external EDI focus.
Build foundation feedback and listening practice	2	This continues to be an area with a less clear strategy and lower level of investment. A recent hire to support this work suggests more progress could be in store and signs of uptake among L4G co-funders show promise; however, L4G shows limited reach within core funder organizations.
Experiment and innovate	3	There have been two promising experiments since 2018 but timelines for concrete implementation and results are unclear and may require additional “staff” capacity. There is an opportunity to explicitly embed EDI early on in both experiments.
Core funders walk the walk	4*	Core funders discuss their commitments to Shared Insight’s mission. Shared Insight is growing in cultural competence, and core funders are embracing and contributing to a greater focus on equity. However, implementation markers around core funder changes reflect low touch activities so that progress to date might be on track but fall short of the full potential.
Embed equity, diversity, and inclusion lenses	4	Working with an EDI consultant has helped build cultural competence, and EDI considerations shape most of Shared Insight’s work. There has been progress on EDI in most strategies, but there are opportunities to embed EDI more deeply.

* The rating for this section has a comment or flag.

BUILD A FEEDBACK FIELD

Strategy Score



On Track
(with a flag)

Rating Overview

- There have been more intentional efforts to build some elements of the field and participate in broader field efforts than in the past.
- There is greater agreement within Shared Insight about what it takes to build the field, but there are still questions about the field's boundaries and Shared Insight's role in driving progress.
- There is a risk of progress stagnating or falling off track without continued intentional focus.

Description of Progress

There have been positive efforts to build a feedback field over this time. Shared Insight's communications team has led this strategy, addressing different elements of the Strong Field framework.ⁱⁱⁱ Specifically, Shared Insight has published blog posts and articles to drive shared vision in the field. Resources, stories, and a redesigned website aim to build the knowledge base around feedback and promote L4G as a standard for high-quality feedback. Communications work is also increasingly infusing EDI into content development and distribution. Examples include an EDI communications campaign that explores the connection between feedback and equity and collaborations with aligned efforts from Feedback Labs. L4G is also contributing to the field's EDI focus by ensuring that materials and coaches explicitly address equity issues and promote equity-focused data collection and analysis. Shared Insight has the opportunity to contribute to building diverse leadership from the field's early stages.

In addition to communications work, Shared Insight recently made a set of research grants to increase the field's knowledge about feedback to explore the connection between feedback and client outcomes. Although timing for results is still unclear, the investment shows commitment to moving the field forward. L4G staff have participated in field building activities by defining high-quality feedback and playing a key role in developing Candid.org's "How We Listen" feedback assessment tool. Nevertheless, there are signals for caution among this meaningful progress. The Strong Field framework provided common language for Shared Insight staff and funders, but important questions remain about Shared Insight's role, and there is a potential trip wire in missing the opportunity to clearly define the field's boundaries to contribute to a shared vision. Currently, the broader network still uses the term "feedback" to mean a broad array of ways to listen or gather input, which could become problematic in establishing standards of practice and making the case for high-quality feedback practice with new audiences.



Consideration

What would it take for the field to become stronger, and what is or should be Shared Insight's role in that process?

BUILD NONPROFIT FEEDBACK PRACTICES

Strategy Score



On Track

Rating Overview

- Shared Insight has further developed L4G through continued co-funded rounds and a new web app, collectively supporting over 400 nonprofits' feedback practices.
- The co-funded model shows consistent impact over time; the web app's optimization is underway, but its effectiveness is still unknown.
- L4G has strengthened the focus on EDI in its internal and external processes.

Description of Progress

L4G has continued to grow over this past year and a half. The co-funded model doubled the number of nonprofits served to 215 and has shown consistent impacts over time on organizations' abilities to conduct effective, high-quality feedback loops. Grantees are learning from feedback, making changes to improve services, and continuing feedback practices after their grant ends. These data suggest that the co-funded model is moving from a theory-based practice to an evidence-informed practice, as there is early evidence of its effectiveness, and there are strong efforts to ensure fidelity.^{iv} In addition, L4G launched and is working to test and optimize a web-based app to support a larger number of nonprofits' feedback work. The web app currently supports 185 organizations, and early results are expected by July 2020.

L4G is also maturing internally, adding staff expertise and systems to support growth and plan for the future. Accordingly, it is planning to develop a business model and growth plan and is working to optimize the service model for nonprofits. Throughout its internal growth and service delivery, L4G is actively considering EDI implications and adjusting to ensure both its work and approach contribute to broader equity, diversity, and inclusion. For example, L4G has trained a diverse group of 17 coaches (though not all are still working with the initiative), disaggregated its own data to search for inequities, and adjusted training materials to help nonprofits conduct culturally responsive data collection and equity-focused analysis. Despite feedback's potential to enable organizations to advance equity, L4G is working to explicitly convey that it is not a silver bullet.

L4G's co-funded model has shown that, with funding and coaching, nonprofits can create high-quality feedback loops that drive internal change. The web app is more scalable, but its relative effectiveness is still unknown. Decisions are still being made about future product offerings and how to balance priorities around full cost coverage, quality of implementation, and how many nonprofits can and should be reached.



Consideration

L4G's co-funded model is moving toward an evidence-informed practice. The web app is more scalable, but its effectiveness is still unknown. What is the most effective model for L4G future growth and sustainability?

BUILD FOUNDATION PRACTICES

Strategy Score



Slightly Off Track

Rating Overview

- Funder engagement continues to have a less clear strategy and lower investment, but extensive funder outreach and a recent hire to support this work suggests future potential.
- Signs of uptake among L4G co-funders show promise as an approach for shifting funders' practices—but with limited reach within core funder organizations.
- There has been little push related to other “listening practices.”

Description of Progress

Currently, Shared Insight has three main activities to build foundations' feedback practices: reaching out to new funders, engaging L4G co-funders (a few of whom are core funders), and influencing core funders as they walk the walk. This section focuses on the first two while the third one is discussed in the “Walking the Walk” section. Since 2018, Shared Insight has mainly used conferences and relevant media for funder outreach, with a total of 52 engagements in funder-related spaces. Thirty-two new funders had one-on-one conversations with Shared Insight staff, but only nine of them requested or initiated that contact. To move this work forward, Shared Insight recently hired one staff and might hire more in the future. One area of focus for staff in this strategy should be embedding an EDI lens, as EDI considerations are currently unclear.

Overall, Shared Insight has grown its network to 96 funding partners: 78 are L4G co-funders, and 18 are core and sidecar funders. Unsurprisingly, core funders are more active than co-funders in hosting and participating in feedback meetings and sharing publicly about their feedback work. However, there is small a group of L4G funders that has been active in these areas. Although L4G's co-funding model was initially designed as a platform to engage funders in feedback conversations, co-funders to date have had little engagement throughout the L4G process. Nevertheless, the majority of L4G co-funders report making changes to their feedback and listening practices, and around half attribute those changes to L4G. This suggests that L4G can be an effective tool for influencing funder's practices, and a deliberate engagement strategy might make it even more effective. However, there are signs that L4G is not having the same effect for all funders. Particularly among core funders, which tend to be bigger staffed foundations, data shows that staff outside of the two core funder representatives know little about L4G and feedback work. This suggests that L4G's effects might depend heavily on how many individual foundation staff members are fully engaged in the process, at least among larger foundations.



Consideration

L4G funders have shown progress, even in the absence of an intentional strategy, and there are other signs of interest among funders. To what extent can Shared Insight's upcoming funder engagement strategy capitalize on these opportunities?

EXPERIMENT AND INNOVATE

Strategy Score



Slightly Off Track,
Trending Up

Rating Overview

- Shared Insight has started two experiments since 2018, with subcommittees and some forward progress on both.
- Both experiments seem promising, but timelines for more concrete forward progress around implementation of the ideas are unclear and may require additional “staff” capacity.
- There is an opportunity to continue to explicitly embed EDI early on in both experiments.

Description of Progress

Shared Insight has started two experiments: one to expand feedback among direct-service nonprofits internationally and one to enable advocacy-focused nonprofits to meaningfully connect with the people they seek to help. Internationally, there were two initial pilot sites and a scheduled listening tour to further investigate the landscape. The advocacy work has \$1.5 million committed and a directional focus on climate change through participatory grant-making. It is currently in the design process following a landscape study.

There is clear movement and energy in this area. Core funders have committed resources and created individual subcommittees to drive each experiment, but both processes are moving slowly. It is unclear when and how additional grant-making will happen, when the experiments will enable collective learning, and if they will inform funding decisions within and outside Shared Insight. In addition, one of the implementation markers in this area is to “apply a power analysis to the triangle of clients/beneficiaries, nonprofits, funders.” It is unclear whether someone within Shared Insight is moving this implementation marker forward. Finally, there was one trip wire in this strategy related to a potential lack in core funders’ energy to adopt practices to enable meaningful connections among advocacy organizations. So far, this trip wire does not seem like a cause for concern given the strong energy behind the advocacy work.



Consideration

What is the right timeframe to expect learning and outcomes on experiments and innovations?

WALKING THE WALK

Strategy Score



On Track
(with a flag)

Ratings overview

- Core funders consistently discuss their organizational and individual commitments to Shared Insight's mission.
- Shared Insight is growing in cultural competence, and core funders are embracing and contributing to a greater focus on equity in the work Shared Insight does and how Shared Insight does it.
- Markers around core funder changes reflect low touch activities; progress to date might be on track but fall short of the full potential.

Description of Progress

Implementation markers for this strategy reflect three ways in which core funders can walk the walk: they could help drive Shared Insight's work and mission forward, engage in an external field-building role to influence others, and drive change within their own foundations. Internal changes among core funders were not within the scope of this assessment. To assess core funders' commitment to Shared Insight's mission, we considered the extent to which their representatives had attended core funder meetings and related activities, participated in work groups, co-funded with L4G, and committed to continued funding for the next phase of Shared Insight. Data shows that a group of eight out of the 13 core funders have engaged deeply, which is also apparent in external field-building work. One area in which all funders have expressed commitment is in embedding a focus on EDI into Shared Insight's work. EDI considerations have shaped where funders choose to meet, meeting agendas, hiring processes, strategy development, and evaluation activities.

Remaining mindful of funders' individual contexts, journeys, and resource allocations, high engagement from more than half of the core funders with support and participation in specific areas from other funders has worked well so far and seems on track in absence of a clear target to compare against. However, the implementation markers also focus more on talking about things, and less on true measures of "walking" or changing practices within core funder institutions. The extent to which conversations about core funders' commitments and involvement in Shared Insight is contributing to shifting internal practices is unclear, and as the L4G co-funding experience shows, there are questions about how much the two representatives from each funder can influence and drive changes among their peers and within their organizations. While progress to date seems on track, we gave an asterisk because we think there's a risk of the current work stagnating as it is, and that current efforts might fall short of the full potential of core funder adoption and modelling of Shared Insight's priorities.



Consideration

What does meaningful engagement mean to different funders given their own journeys, resource allocations, and overall alignment with Shared Insight's goals? What are opportunities for all funders to meaningfully engage?

EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION LENSES

Strategy Score



On Track

Ratings overview

- Working with an EDI consultant has helped leverage opportunities to build cultural competence and agency within staff and funders.
- EDI considerations shape meetings, content, communications, hiring processes, strategy development, and evaluation activities.
- There has been progress on EDI in most strategies, but there are opportunities to further embed EDI more deeply and in more areas.

Description of Progress

Shared Insight has partnered with an EDI consultant to build cultural competence by continuously analyzing historic systems of oppression and discerning how its work and approach can contribute to greater equity, diversity, and inclusion. Intentionally designed meeting locations, agendas, and facilitation, along with equitable evaluation practices and EDI-related markers in the theory of change have paved the way for constructive collective learning.

There has also been progress within specific strategies. For example, L4G has disaggregated its own data and developed materials to assist organizations in conducting equity-focused data analysis through culturally competent practices. The proposed participatory grant-making process for experimenting with advocacy-focused nonprofits provides an opportunity to shift grant-making power to representatives from communities funders seek to help. Shared Insight's communications work to explore connections between feedback and equity is driving a broader field conversation about the topic.

Nevertheless, there are opportunities to further embed EDI within these strategies, particularly within funder engagement, where the slower progress overall also means slower progress in EDI. Other opportunities include contributing to greater diversity among key players in the feedback field and ensuring that new initiatives are designed with an EDI focus from the start, instead of applying an EDI lens to an already designed initiative like L4G.



Consideration

How can Shared Insight continue to progress on its journey and further develop its EDI lenses so that its work and approach become tools to advance equity, diversity, and inclusion?



OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Observations

This assessment allowed us to take stock of Shared Insight's strategy and provide an outside perspective on progress against its updated theory of change. This section presents a few observations for core funders and staff to consider as they move forward.



There has been positive progress to date, but some of it is at risk without continued attention and intentional effort.

While there has been positive progress thus far, most lines of work will require specific attention and focus to maintain progress and stay on track toward achieving outcomes. Data suggests that the most at-risk strategy currently is building foundation feedback and listening practices. Currently, there is an opportunity to intentionally design this strategy and set it up for success moving forward, but this largely depends on devising an effective funder engagement strategy and appropriately staffing this work to execute on that strategy.

Experiment and innovate is also slightly off track, given the slow progress to date. The experiments seem promising; however, they will require continued attention to ensure that they are designed so they inform future strategy decisions, with special attention to how Shared Insight and the broader field will learn from the experiments. Similarly, continued progress within the feedback field and walking the walk depends on Shared Insight's intentional focus and are unlikely to meet expectations with an ad hoc or less structured approach.



Shared Insight's EDI lenses are stronger, and there are still opportunities to grow and improve.

Since 2017, Shared Insight has partnered with an EDI consultant to more intentionally embed an equity focus in its work and approach. Its work since 2018 has helped staff and funders grow in cultural competence while externally it strives to be an agent of change toward greater equity, diversity, and inclusion. Nevertheless, the journey is far from over, and there are numerous opportunities to continue strengthening the EDI focus. Specifically, Shared Insight is in a position to design new initiatives and grant-making strategies with an EDI focus from the beginning. In addition, there are opportunities to revise the theory of change's implementation markers and outcomes to further reflect EDI considerations, paying attention to outcome achievement but also to who is included in the process and who achieves those outcomes.



Shared Insight could revise and reduce its implementation markers to improve the utility of its theory of change as a management and evaluation tool.

The current theory of change was developed by Shared Insight staff as a management tool to track progress. The theory of change was meant to be a living document to be reviewed and revised as necessary to guide staff and Shared Insight’s work. However, some implementation markers are broad and do not include clear targets, which inhibit their use as learning tools to test assumptions and gauge progress. There are also too many markers. Going forward, Shared Insight could select a few of the most meaningful markers that core funders agree are critical and could provide more useful guidance and guardrails to staff. As the second phase of Shared Insight comes to an end, the opportunity is ripe for a revision of the theory of change to help guide work moving forward.

Conclusion

Shared Insight updated its theory of change in early 2018, reflecting a shift to focus on ensuring that communities and people that foundations and nonprofits seek to help are better off in ways they define for themselves. ORS Impact leveraged its knowledge of Shared Insight’s work and its position as an outside party to hold up the mirror and provide a high-level assessment on progress to date. We found positive progress overall, particularly in building nonprofit practices and focusing on equity, diversity, and inclusion in both its work and approach. Shared Insight has also moved forward in building the feedback field and walking the walk, but sustaining and building on this progress will require special attention and continued commitment. In addition, experiments in new areas of feedback are underway and seem promising despite slow progress, while there are opportunities to improve and strengthen funder engagement to build foundation feedback and listening practices. While not exhaustive, this outside assessment can provide a useful point of reference and an opportunity to review strategies and expectations as Shared Insight prepares to embark on its third phase of operations.

ⁱ The theory of change also includes a few mid-term and long-term outcomes, but we focus on short-term outcomes since we are considering a short time frame in this analysis. We would not expect progress in longer term outcomes.

ⁱⁱ The complete rating scale includes an “NA” rating, which conveys that the data available does not allow for an independent assessment at this time either because it is too soon to tell whether progress is on or off track, or because there is no measurable data available to assess progress. For visual simplicity and because the “NA” rating was not used at the strategy level, we exclude it from Table 1 in this report. The addendum shows the full rating scale as “NA” was indeed used for a few implementation markers.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Strong Field Framework: A Guide and Toolkit for Funders and Nonprofits Committed to Large Scale Impact*. The Bridgespan Group for The James Irvine Foundation. June 2009.

^{iv} *Moving Towards Evidence-Based Practice: Continuum, ORS Impact*. Adapted from the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, Children’s Administration, May 2006; “Guidelines for CBCAP Lead Agencies on Evidence-Based and Evidence-Informed Programs and Practices: Learning Along the Way”; “Benefits and Costs of Prevention and Early Intervention Programs for Youth” (Washington State Institute for Public Policy).

