



THE POWER OF THE PAUSE

Shared Learning for Adaptive Philanthropy

GEO 2026 — June 1, 2026

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Session Outcomes



Explore why pausing for shared learning matters for adaptive philanthropy



Experience reflection and sensemaking through the *What?/So What?/Now What?* Reflection Model



Engage in a Story Harvest as a participatory sensemaking practice



Reflect on how shared learning shows up in your work and where the practice could be strengthened



Leave with practical ideas and tools that can be applied across our different contexts

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Why Internal Learning Matters



We're aiming to create a virtuous cycle of **aligning, acting, and learning** that results in **better ideas, strategies, and ways of working** that increase our impact.

adrienne maree brown,
Emergent Strategy, p. 175

Consider the following:

- Where does accountability for learning currently live in your organization?
 - What makes reflection and shared sense-making difficult in your day-to-day work?
 - Where does learning stay siloed or break down within your organization?
 - Where does your organization move fastest and pause least?
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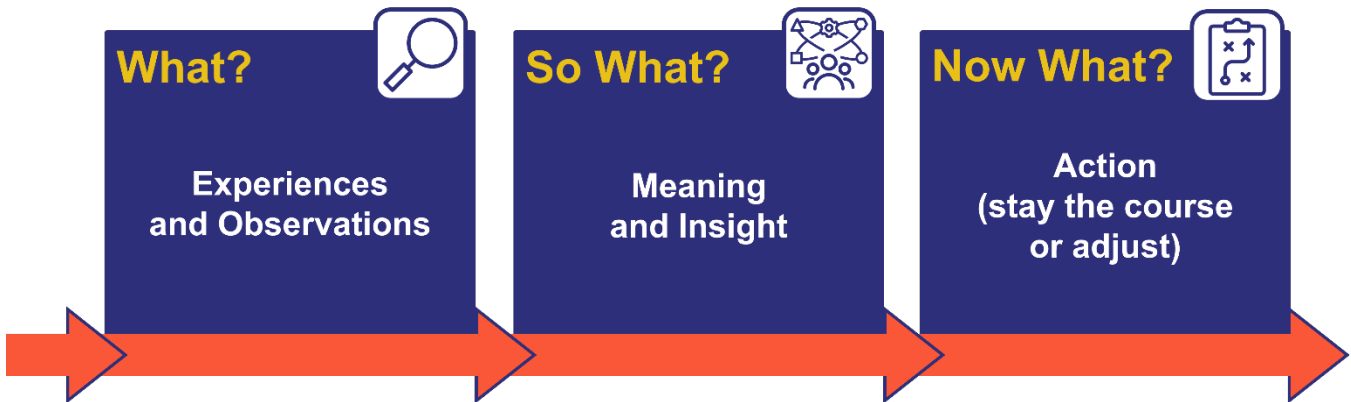
Key Practices and Conditions for Shared Learning

Shared learning doesn't happen automatically. Identifying essential conditions and implementing intentional practices helps ensure reflection is meaningful, consistent, and connected to action.

Which of these practices or conditions already support or could improve shared learning within your organization?

Practice or Condition	We Have...	We're Building/ Missing...
Clear purpose for learning conversations There is a shared understanding of why learning is happening and how it connects to our work and goals.		
Leadership buy-in There is ongoing support and prioritization by senior leadership.		
Expected participation Staff participation is expected, not optional (learning is a part of the work).		
Dedicated time for learning There is protected, scheduled time for shared learning.		
Consistent cadence Reflection and shared learning happen routinely.		
Psychological safety / "brave" spaces Staff feel comfortable sharing challenges, uncertainty, and differing perspectives.		
Focus on real work and lived experience Learning conversations are grounded in actual work, not abstract discussion.		
Using insights to inform action Learning informs ongoing strategy, decisions, and adjustments.		
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What? So What? Now What? Reflection Model



The **What? So What? Now What?** Reflection Model connects experience, meaning, and action to move us from **what happened** to **why it matters**, and to decisions about **what we should continue or do differently**.

Discussion questions and protocols can be selected to fit the purpose(s) of conversations. The following two pages provide space for notetaking and examples of different facilitation approaches that can be used with the model.

Approach / Protocol	Model Application	Supports	Description
<u>After Action Review (AAR)</u>	What → So What → Now What (bridges all)	Structured reflection on a specific event or project	Compare what was expected vs. what happened, identify lessons, then define improvements
<u>Appreciative Inquiry</u>	What → So What → Now What (bridges all)	Strengths-based reflection; identifying what's working and how to build on it	Focus on peak experiences → extract success factors → design future actions
<u>ATLAS: Looking at Data</u>	What → So What → Now What (bridges all)	Structured, step-by-step data analysis that leads to actionable insights	Participants move in sequence from describing data → interpreting patterns → identifying implications and actions
<u>Data-Driven Dialogue</u>	What → So What → Now What (bridges all)	Building shared meaning from data and aligning on actions	Uses three rounds — observe, interpret, then discuss implications — to build shared meaning
<u>Gallery Walk / Data Walk</u>	What	Making data visible; collective observation without early interpretation	Participants rotate through charts, dashboards, or artifacts and note observations before discussing meaning
<u>Rose-Bud-Thorn</u>	What	Quick reflection on strengths, challenges, and opportunities	Participants identify positives, challenges, and emerging ideas
<u>Story Harvest</u>	What → So What (bridges both)	Surfacing lived experience; grounding reflection in real work; building shared understanding	Participants share stories; others listen for patterns (e.g., pivotal moments, relationships), then transition to meaning-making
<u>Consultancy Protocol / Troika Consulting</u>	What → So What (can extend to Now What)	Exploring dilemmas and gaining structured peer insight	A presenter shares a dilemma, peers ask clarifying questions, then offer perspectives and suggestions
<u>1-2-4-All</u>	So What (adaptable to other phases)	Inclusive participation; surfacing diverse perspectives quickly	Individuals reflect, then progressively share in pairs, small groups, and whole group
<u>Affinity Mapping</u>	So What	Identifying patterns and themes across stories, data, and ideas	Participants group observations or insights into themes and label meaning
<u>Assumption Storming</u>	So What	Making implicit beliefs visible	Teams identify and test underlying assumptions
<u>Five Whys</u>	So What	Root cause analysis	Repeatedly ask “why” to uncover deeper drivers

<u>Force-Field Analysis</u>	So What	Understanding what is driving or holding back progress	Participants identify driving and restraining forces shaping the current state, helping explain why things are the way they are
<u>Heart, Hand, Mind</u>	So What	Integrating emotional, practical, and cognitive meaning making	Participants reflect on an experience through three prompts: feelings, actions, and thinking
<u>Polarity Mapping</u>	So What	Navigating tensions	Identify interdependent “both/and” dynamics
<u>Systems Mapping</u>	So What	Understanding complexity	Visualize relationships between factors and influences
<u>World Café</u>	So What → Now What	Collective sense-making across perspectives; cross-pollination of ideas	Small group conversations rotate around key questions, building layered insight
<u>15% Solutions</u>	Now What	Immediate, feasible actions	Individuals identify what they can do within their control
<u>20/20 Vision</u>	Now What	Defining goals and articulating a clear picture of success	Participants describe what success looks like in concrete, observable terms
<u>Backcasting</u>	Now What	Planning from a desired future	Define future goal, then work backward
<u>Impact–Effort Matrix</u>	Now What	Prioritizing actions	Map ideas by effort vs. impact
<u>Prune the Future</u>	Now What	Narrowing focus and making strategic choices	Participants eliminate lower-priority ideas to focus on a small, high-impact set
<u>Start–Stop–Continue</u>	Now What	Translating insights into clear, actionable adjustments	Teams identify what to start, stop, and continue doing based on reflection
<u>Three Horizons</u>	Now What	Strategic foresight; connecting present reality to future direction	Map current practices (H1), emerging innovations (H2), and longer-term vision (H3)
<u>Who Do</u>	Now What	Assigning ownership and accountability for next steps	The group names specific actions and assigns clear ownership for each one

Story Harvesting



Collective story harvesting engages participants in shared listening, learning, and sense-making about individual stories of success and failure to examine what it means for our individual and collective future work in and with communities.

GEO Conference Story Prompt:

What has it looked like to shift our relationship with grantees/partners?

1. **Storytelling** | The storyteller will share:
 - A story of a shift they are proud of; and
 - A story of something they wish had gone differently.
2. **Active Listening** | Each table listens for how their assigned listen-for thread is present in the stories shared by the storyteller:
 - **Pivotal moments** | When did the breakthrough or turning point take place?
 - **Process Arc** | What actions, decisions, steps, or processes shaped what happened?
 - **Magic** | What meaning and/or unexpected moments of transformation and/or synchronicity stood out?
 - **Relationship (the “red” thread)** | What was the "heart" work that happened between people in the story? What values were expressed?

What? (Individual reflection) | What did you hear? What surprised you? What stood out?

3. So What? (Table conversation) | At your table, discuss why what you heard matters.



4. Storyteller Reflection | The storyteller will share an insight or gift they received from the listeners.

5. Now What? (Individual reflection) | Reflect on what you heard from the story harvest, your table, and the group. What can you apply in your individual approaches and/or organization?



Engaging In Shared Learning with Grantees

Facilitating meaningful shared learning conversations with grantees is grounded in internal alignment, trust, and a genuine willingness to listen, reflect on what we hear, and adapt as appropriate. Are we creating conditions where honest, transparent learning is possible? If we are a funder, how might our position of power shape or influence participants' experience? What internal work might we need to do, or conversations might we need to have, to facilitate or strengthen shared learning with grantees?

The following organizational self-assessment is intended to support reflection. It is not a checklist to complete, but an invitation to consider some of the internal conditions that may support — or potentially limit — shared learning with grantees.

Internal Alignment and Clarity

- We are aligned internally on the purpose for the session (learning from, not directing grantees).
- We have examined and are willing to challenge our own assumptions.
- Internal stakeholders are aligned on approach and expectations.

Relationships and Trust

- We have already built (or are in the process of building) trust with grantees.
- Grantees have experienced consistent engagement with us, not just one-off interactions.
- We're prepared to show up as partners, guiding and not directing.
- There is space for authentic, candid conversation beyond just reporting.

Conditions for Open Dialogue

- We can create a "brave" space where honest feedback is genuinely welcomed and encouraged.
- We are open to hearing challenges, critiques, and differing perspectives.
- Time and structure will intentionally be created for reflection, not just information sharing.

Learning Mindset

- We are approaching this as a listening and learning opportunity.
- We have practiced shared learning internally and continue to build that muscle.
- We are ready and willing to surface, hear, and sit with insights and feedback from grantees, including challenges, and tensions, not just successes.
- We are not expecting immediate answers or solutions.

Readiness to Act on Learning

- We have a plan for how insights will be documented and shared both internally and externally.
- We are prepared to translate learning into decisions, strategy, or next steps.
- We are thinking beyond this session for ongoing engagement.
- We are prepared to consider how to adjust our approach based on what we hear.

Mostly checked	Well-positioned to engage in or deepen shared learning with grantees.
Mixed	Consider opportunities for additional internal alignment or relationship-building to strengthen or prepare for shared learning with grantees.
Few checked	Consider focusing first (or more intentionally) on internal learning and alignment.

Reflection and Takeaways

One insight or “aha” I’m taking with me:

One practice I’d like to try:

One conversation I want to initiate to support shared learning:

One question I’m still holding:

Tools and Resources

Articles and Blogs

- Hall, M.J. (2023). [“Reflecting on Reflection”](https://www.td.org/content/atd-blog/reflecting-on-reflection) | <https://www.td.org/content/atd-blog/reflecting-on-reflection>
- [“Pocket Guide to Probing Questions”](https://www.clee.org/resources/pocket-guide-to-probing-questions/) | <https://www.clee.org/resources/pocket-guide-to-probing-questions/>

Books

- Gray, D., and Brown, S. (2025). [*Gamestorming 2.0: An Updated Playbook for Innovators, Rule Breakers, and Changemakers*](https://a.co/d/00g3Kt4P) | <https://a.co/d/00g3Kt4P>
- Kennedy, K. (2025). [*Learning That Lasts: Reflection Activities for Trainers and Designers*](https://a.co/d/0hsjG5sF) | <https://a.co/d/0hsjG5sF>
- Laborie, K., and Stone, T. (2022). [*Interact and Engage, 2nd Edition: 75+ Activities for Virtual Training, Meetings, and Webinars*](https://a.co/d/0df9vB04) | <https://a.co/d/0df9vB04>
- Lipmanowicz, H., and McCandless, K. (2014). [*The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures: Simple Rules to Unleash A Culture of Innovation*](https://a.co/d/0eGmGINs) | <https://a.co/d/0eGmGINs>
- Nelson K., Ronka, D., Lang, L., Korabek-Emerson, L., and White, J. (2020). [*Designing & Leading Life-Changing Workshops: Creating the Conditions for Transformation in Your Groups, Trainings, and Retreats*](https://a.co/d/0278cRdu) | <https://a.co/d/0278cRdu>
- Pike Pluth, B. (2022). [*Creative Training: A Train-The-Trainer Field Guide*](https://a.co/d/0a4KqHyO) | <https://a.co/d/0a4KqHyO>
- Rosback, K. (2023). [*Ultimate Facilitation Tool Kit*](https://a.co/d/0f6GpGPG) | <https://a.co/d/0f6GpGPG>
- Smith, M. (2021). [*Thrive: The Facilitator’s Guide to Radically Inclusive Meetings*](https://a.co/d/0doWPcz8) | <https://a.co/d/0doWPcz8>
- Swire, B. (2025). [*Safe Danger: The Art Of Taking Playful Risks To Fuel Creativity, Unlock Potential And Build Success*](https://a.co/d/0f9COCiZ) | <https://a.co/d/0f9COCiZ>

Websites

- [Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations That Matter](https://artofhosting.org/) | <https://artofhosting.org/>
- [CLEE Protocol Resource Library](https://www.clee.org/resources/) | <https://www.clee.org/resources/>
- [Dabbling in the Data: A Hands-On Guide to Participatory Data Analysis](https://www.publicprofit.net/dabbling-in-data/) | <https://www.publicprofit.net/dabbling-in-data/>
- [Liberating Structures: Including and Unleashing Everyone](https://www.liberatingstructures.com/) | <https://www.liberatingstructures.com/>
- [Reflection Toolkit](https://reflection.ed.ac.uk/) | <https://reflection.ed.ac.uk/>
- [Reflective Practice Toolkit](https://libguides.cam.ac.uk/reflectivepracticetoolkit) | <https://libguides.cam.ac.uk/reflectivepracticetoolkit>
- [Workshop Weaver: Facilitation Methods Library](https://workshopweaver.com/facilitation-methods) | <https://workshopweaver.com/facilitation-methods>

Materials from Today’s Session

