

Transforming Philanthropy through Relationships

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In the fall of 2014, the third cohort of the Terrance Keenan Institute for Emerging Leaders in Health Philanthropy (TKI) gathered in Washington, DC, for a two-day workshop focused on philanthropic leadership. A recurrent theme during our time together was the idea that the field of philanthropy is rapidly changing. While traditional philanthropy positioned foundations as silent backers of programs, movements, and organizations, this wave of philanthropy is more active and engaged. Foundations are becoming agents of policy and systems change: seeding innovation, offering expertise and consultation, and developing partnerships. After much discussion, the TKI Fellows reached a provocative conclusion: as grantmakers, our social capital may be as valuable as our grant funding.

Relationships are an essential ingredient for social change. However, in the midst of the philanthropic sector's efforts to improve practices and quantify impact, the importance of relationships often gets overlooked. While it is quickly becoming the norm for foundations to structure and measure grantmaking effectiveness, relationship building is given much less attention. This is not because relationships are not time consuming: Interact for Health conducted a time study and found that program staff spend an average of 25 percent of their time doing external relationship building. But the work of relationships often happens out of the spotlight. It is the invisible core of a foundation's work. Unfortunately, this means that the work to develop and maintain trusting, authentic, transformational relationships is not explicitly supported and certainly not measured.

As we discussed our experiences, the TKI fellows provided examples of the value and importance of relationships in our work. We observed that foundations benefit from making investments in a variety of relationships: relationships with other funders, relationships with policymakers and key stakeholders, relationships with grantees, and relationships with

content experts. This article shares some ways that our organizations have fostered and supported relationships.

ADOPTING POLICIES, PRACTICES, AND SYSTEMS THAT SUPPORT RELATIONSHIPS

- The Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City (HCF) actively observes the Missouri Open Meetings Law, which makes all board proceedings, committee meetings, and grant records open to the public. While foundations often have a reputation for being a “black box”—whose decisions and internal working are a complete mystery—HCF's policy means that its decisionmaking processes are accessible to any interested community member, and upwards of 40 organizations are often present to observe HCF's board proceedings. This practice has helped build a culture of mutual trust between HCF and its grantees. This atmos-

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phere of transparency has helped facilitate strong working relationships with grantees and community partners, and positions HCF as a partner and player in the health field, rather than a passive observer.

- In order to advance its policy goals, the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky has prioritized relationship building with policymakers. The foundation restructured its staffing to include both a communications director and a health policy director in 2012. Along with the president/CEO, this team develops and maintains relationships with legislators, state and local government officials, and various associations and organizations working on health policy. As foundations become increasingly involved in policy change as a means to advance their mission, it is important to recognize the time necessary to build the relationships and reputation

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necessary to be a meaningful player in the policy change arena.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER FUNDERS FOR DEEPER AND SCALED IMPACT

- The Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky and Interact for Health have worked closely together since 2008 to fund, implement, and disseminate the Kentucky Health Issues Poll (KHIP), an annual telephone survey asking Kentuckians about a variety of salient health topics. KHIP provides a valuable source of health policy data in Kentucky, and has become a trusted source of information for policymakers, the media, and community members. The two funders also cosponsor the Data! Forum, convening shared stakeholders and promoting the foundations' shared interests.
- In 2012 Caring for Colorado Foundation and Rose Community Foundation (Denver, Colorado) partnered to explore opportunities for philanthropic investment and advocacy on issues related to young children's mental health and social and emotional development. The two foundations funded an environmental scan, engaged with subject matter experts and community champions, and established a funders' network that has since grown to include 11 participating foundations representing diverse interests in education, health, and early childhood. Ultimately, the *time invested* and the *effort put forth* in building the funder-to-funder relationships have resulted in the creation of a powerful, collective voice for investments in children's mental health and a pooled \$11.5 million funding opportunity—LAUNCH Together.

LEVERAGING IMPACT BY INVESTING IN GRANTEE COLLABORATION AND NETWORKS

- In 2012 Interact for Health partnered with the National Council to provide consultation to help behavioral health grantees prepare for the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. Rather than provide consultation to each organization separately, Interact for Health created a learning collaborative, which included 27 organizations from around the Greater Cincinnati area. The learning collaborative met regularly for more than two years to learn about process improvement models, explore new billing practices, and share lessons learned. As a whole, the participating groups were able to implement organizational improvements that resulted in an estimated \$2 million in cost

savings. More notably, participating organizations described the benefits of the relationships built, which allowed them to share ideas and business practices in a safe and non-competitive environment.

- The Maine Health Access Foundation (MeHAF) has developed a three-phase Healthy Communities grant program that emphasizes relationship building between grantees and their communities, specifically those who have been historically isolated and excluded. MeHAF offers grantees time and funding to develop new relationships and strengthen key partnerships, and encourages grantees to think creatively about how to capture this as an outcome of their work. Time, space, and resources have allowed communities to see the well-being of the whole, not individual parts.

Relationship building is not easy. It requires time and resources, and often requires us to yield our own strategies and goals in deference to the partnership or community. It is an important component in any community change strategy. Recognizing relationships as a valuable asset that can help a foundation achieve its mission carries repercussions for all aspects of a foundation's operations, and we urge philanthropy to consider and discuss the following questions:

- Does our strategic plan identify the relationships and partnerships necessary to accomplish our goals?
- How do we ensure that all staff members have time for relationship building—internally and externally?
- Do we reward and recognize staff for engaging in relationship-building activities, rather than mastery of paperwork?
- Do our evaluation approaches and systems capture the impact of our relationships, as well as their quantifiable outcomes and impact?
- Do we engage key partners and stakeholders as we develop new strategies or initiatives?
- What mechanisms do we have in place to listen and respond to community feedback?
- Do any of our grantmaking policies or practices inhibit organizations' abilities to build and sustain partnerships?
- Do we structure our work to fit funding timelines, or do we allow time and flexibility to support the transformational relationships necessary to accomplish our goals?

Certainly, these are challenging questions. However, we believe that they are worth wrestling with. Relationships can be transformative—to foundations, to our strategies, to our bodies of work, and ultimately, to the communities we seek to serve.