

The One that Got Away: Emerging Leaders in Health Philanthropy on Moving up and Moving on

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Does philanthropy in the 21st century offer a viable career path for rising leaders with fresh visions and several decades of potential contributions before them, or is it a significant, yet temporary stop on what is sure to be a varied career journey? The inaugural class of Grantmakers In Health's (GIH) Terrance Keenan Institute for Emerging Leaders in Health Philanthropy (TKI)¹ has been actively pondering this question. It started as a theoretical question when we convened in person in September 2010. During the course of our time together as a cohort, the question about our ability to grow from emerging into full-fledged leaders went from theoretical to weighing heavily on our minds.

While opportunities for professional development, advancement, and promotion were at the time and continue to be central to the conversation, TKI fellows view leadership in a holistic sense in the spirit of Terrance Keenan. Terrance Keenan, the TKI program's namesake, was a leader with profound impact in the programmatic work he shaped while at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and in the wider philanthropic sector. It is important to emphasize that Terrance Keenan never carried the title of CEO, but he was supported in practicing his philanthropic leadership over many decades. Our quest in continuing to grow as leaders is very much in line with this vision of leadership and continual growth. The question we are interested in exploring is how we achieve our recognized potential as emerging leaders in health philanthropy.

Over the course of the year following our initial gathering in 2010, the leadership question became more of a salient challenge as we watched 23 percent of our TKI colleagues leave health philanthropy to work in the nonprofit and consulting

fields. The spectrum of stories behind these transitions is quite varied, from unease with new foundation leadership and direction, to a desire to work more directly on frontline programs, to wanting to explore opportunities to build new skills and expertise. The departures were first met by excitement and pride because we support each other's professional and personal growth – be it in philanthropy or elsewhere – and we are confident that our colleagues will be transformative leaders in their new positions. Our positive feelings were tempered, however, by concerns for the future of health philanthropy with the loss of highly talented leaders and concern as the exodus reinforced our anxieties about opportunities for growth in relatively flat organizations that often search externally when hiring for leadership positions. We turned to each other to process what was happening and its implications.

From the fellows' perspective, philanthropy is lacking formal leadership development and opportunities for growth for emerging professionals. Historically, philanthropy has not been considered a long-term career, but one that is more appropriate for mid- to late-career professionals. As more people enter philanthropy earlier in their careers, however, there is a desire to identify opportunities for a path to further leadership. So is health philanthropy ready for this increase of young people yearning to become leaders in this field? How does philanthropy value the contributions of young leaders? Should foundations create these opportunities or should they adopt the philosophy of some foundations and encourage staff to move onto other foundations or out of philanthropy altogether?

There is of course no one path or easy answers to the questions we pose, but we provide the following recommendations as starting points for dialogue. Our hope is that our

¹ Seventeen TKI fellows were nominated by their CEOs and selected by GIH to participate in the program.

thoughts can spark further discussion of these issues within health philanthropy.

- **Have direct conversations.** Talking openly about long-term aspirations, needs, opportunities, and limitations between emerging leaders and senior foundation leaders takes the mystery out of where each individual stands and at minimum will likely result in a stronger professional development plan for the emerging leader. These conversations can provide the senior leader with an opportunity to think creatively about how to provide emerging leaders with new and varied experiences essential to strengthening leadership skills such as staff supervision, board management, or financial management.
- **Take inspiration from the corporate sector.** Johnson & Johnson, employer to one of the TKI Fellows, is one of many organizations that has an internal department dedicated to recognizing and tracking emerging leaders so that they receive the professional development, mentorship, and exposure to the business of different divisions across the company. This is done in order to position emerging leaders to take on increasing leadership responsibility within the organization. While most foundations do not have the same capacity as a global corporation, they could adopt a culture of retaining their best employees and taking very deliberate steps toward leadership development.
- **Take inspiration from other foundations.** During the program there were a few TKI fellows who were promoted from senior program officers to directors in recognition of their contributions, growing national recognition, and ability to act as an ambassador for the foundation. A title change can be helpful in rewarding progress, can set new expectations to challenge staff to grow and build skills, and help position emerging leaders for future leadership opportunities.
- **Encourage movement between foundations.** While most foundations are relatively flat and growth may be challenging within one foundation, there may be opportunities for emerging leaders to build their leadership skills by shifting to a different health foundation. Senior leaders can help strengthen the field of philanthropy by highlighting and encouraging promising leaders to investigate new opportunities at other foundations. By enabling and encouraging movement between foundations, we create leadership growth opportunities and also develop new possibilities for collaboration between foundations.
- **Showcase emerging leaders to key stakeholders.** Emerging leaders in philanthropy spend a lot of time doing fantastic work behind the scenes. Usually there are limited opportunities for emerging leaders to showcase their skills and leadership potential to boards, policymakers, and other stakeholders because they work in the shadow of

current leaders. Foundations should support emerging leaders to publish, speak, and serve on committees as ways to exhibit their talents. This may mean that foundation executives will have to pass on an enticing invitation in order to showcase the emerging leaders. With these types of occasions, emerging leaders will find new leadership opportunities and demonstrate the bench strength of the foundation.

- **Create opportunities to learn from other foundations.** Foundations can create new opportunities for emerging leaders to gain new insights and skills by encouraging them to visit and learn from other relevant foundations. This peer-to-peer learning will provide the emerging leader with new opportunities to grow while challenging them to apply these insights to strengthen their own foundation and the broader field.
- **Build leadership skills and training for philanthropists.** As funders we often build and support training and leadership programs for nurses, doctors, and administrators but have not looked closely at our own field to understand how we will build the next generation of health philanthropy CEOs and leaders. Rather than looking externally for these leaders, we should consider looking inside the field and invest in creating leaders for the future of health philanthropy. While a few nonprofit organizations have developed programs to support emerging leaders in philanthropy to deepen their leadership skills, these programs can be strengthened, better publicized within foundations, and expanded to be more diverse and relevant to a broader population.

In coming together, we have learned the huge potential that exists in the emerging talent pool within health philanthropy. Given the attrition we have seen within this first TKI class, we challenge philanthropy leaders to engage in a dialogue with us about how to retain emerging leaders in health philanthropy or at least ensure that there are avenues for optimizing the talent that exists. We have outlined a few options for how foundations could start to take steps to build a path forward for future leaders; we know there are many other possibilities to explore. The TKI fellows look forward to extending the conversation and hope this can spur further discussions and idea generation so that we do not become the TKI class that “got away.”

VIEWS FROM THE FIELD is offered by GIH as a forum for health grantmakers to share insights and experiences. If you are interested in participating, please contact Faith Mitchell at 202.452.8331 or fmitchell@gih.org.