

Reflections on the POWER OF VOICE

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One of my favorite quotations is: *To know and not to do is not to know*. If you re-read it a couple of times you will get the gist of what it means. How often do we as foundations know the solution to endemic problems in our communities and yet fail to take on the challenge? Somehow it is not our problem if it does not fit into our funding guidelines. We have a responsibility to raise our voices because we are the stewards of the resources that the community has entrusted us to oversee.

The power of our voice should be used when we have something to add to the conversation. We should be deeply aware of and understand the assets and challenges of the communities we serve. When we have evidence (best practices), experience (have solved similar challenges), or a deep understanding of the problem and the solution (expertise), we should be raising our voices as loud and as often as we can. The true test is how we invest our resources behind the solution: *knowing and not doing is not knowing*.

We should be speaking truth to power, whether to municipal elected officials, other foundations, or the business community. The community's voice should be raised through our voice to those power bases that have not responded to partnership opportunities to solve vital health challenges faced by the community. We can do this through how we spend our grant dollars, community forums and collaborative gatherings, and in our communications messaging. Especially when the community has not been able to speak for themselves, we should be raising their voice or at least their perspectives.

Most especially, foundations should use the power of their voice in the actions of their leadership. Too often foundation CEOs and trustees stay in the safety of the foundation confines rather than become active in the real challenges faced by the community. Pope Francis wrote that a good shepherd is going to smell like sheep. How often does philanthropy leadership smell like sheep? Some of my most powerful and useful experiences as a foundation CEO have been in my

moments in the community, whether it is passing out food in our homeless encampments, listening to our HIV clients, or building a garden with low-income families. The community is always the best teacher.

Foundations can be challenged in communicating our ideas. We tend to use jargon, foundation-speak, and buzz words to capture our ideas. Leveraging, sustaining, grassroots and grassroots, logic models, and the like all have the potential to keep us at a distance from the very communities we hope to serve. We must be able to speak plainly and still

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meaningfully so that all members of our community understand not only *what* we do or *how* we do it, but far more importantly *why* we do what we do. How well we can speak to values, such as justice, equity, and integrity, will determine how well the community can support our efforts. It is the values of the community that we should strive to live out.

If our goal is to live out these values then we almost by definition must be raising the issues facing our community in public debate. We have a leadership responsibility to raise and frame not only the challenges, but also our vision of the solution and our commitment of the dollars and expertise that we are willing to invest in that solution.

I often am frustrated that the leadership of foundations does not adequately reflect the communities that we serve. Our pipeline of diverse leaders is not as deep as it needs to be if we are to craft authentic solutions to the community's challenges. Herein lays a challenge that I think we are all faced with: How do we better represent the interests and dreams of the community when we represent only a small portion of the experience of the communities we serve? I often reflect how differently I see the world as a Latin, gay male with an early childhood program background. My decades of experience working in community-based

organizations allows me to understand community organizing, program design, community participation, and change processes so differently than colleagues who have illustrious careers only within philanthropy.

Perhaps that is why oftentimes philanthropy takes such a timid and guarded stance toward policy advocacy. The problems we address are tough. They do not lend themselves to quick, easy, or inexpensive solutions. And yet, if we are to be effective in addressing challenges, such as the social determinants of health, then we must be willing to take risks, get uncomfortable, push an agenda, and galvanize the community and all its sectors toward a comprehensive solution. If we are to improve the health of our communities we must raise our voice and advocate to add one's voice. The power of our voice is when we speak collectively, as well as locally, to remind the world that we not only know but we are also willing to do— and thus pass the truest test of that knowledge.

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