



Creating a Culture of Respect in Philanthropy

There is a lot of talk in philanthropy about organizational culture in foundations. I don't know about you, but I have noticed a culture of disrespect when it comes to the way foundations deal with grantees, consultant partners, and even themselves. Luckily - in my experience - this is the exception not the norm. Still, it's troubling. Here are three examples:

- A foundation colleague told me his foundation has a “culture of double booking meetings” including among their own staff. He said, for example, you might schedule an hour-long meeting with a colleague to discuss an important matter, and when the colleague shows up you learn you only have 10 minutes because she booked another meeting at the same time. This is apparently so ubiquitous, that my colleague is concerned about scheduling senior level leaders at his foundation to attend a meeting with senior leaders of another foundation that is of strategic importance to the foundation, *because his is worried that his colleagues will double book themselves and not show up!*
- A board member at a family foundation intentionally wanted to keep her grant application long and cumbersome, and refused to purchase an online application system, *because she felt nonprofits should have to work for their money.* Never mind the fact that her own staff would also have to shoulder a needlessly cumbersome process - assuming that nonprofits aren't already working their tails off is ignorant at best, and downright disrespectful at worst.
- The CEO of one of the largest foundation in a state wanted to hire a consultant I know, but he wanted to unilaterally change the consultant's payment terms, *because the foundation was concerned about its “cash flow needs.”* This CEO then was shocked when the consultant insisted on a signed contract and a partial payment in advance before starting the project and buying a plane ticket for travel. Let's think for a moment: If someone you were working with indicated that there may be problems with cash flow, wouldn't you want to secure some portion of payment up front? And who would you expect to have greater cash flow needs, a very large foundation or a solo practitioner consultant?

I am positive that none of the foundation staff or trustees in these anecdotes intended any disrespect. I'm also pretty sure that it never crossed their minds that they were being disrespectful to people who could have been strong allies. So how does a grantmaker avoid behaving disrespectfully? Here are three things to try:

1. **Flip the tables.** Because so many people want to please grantmakers, they often don't question them. Therefore, as you ask things of others, be sure to put yourselves in their shoes. Consider the burden you're asking them to lift and make sure it's not disproportionate to your own.
2. **Listen carefully.** In any of the cases above, it would take courage for the disrespected party to speak up about what they perceive as shabby treatment. Standing up for yourself to your boss, or your funder, or your client takes some guts. So if someone expresses a concern to you about their situation, be sure to listen carefully and honor what they're saying. Brushing them off as whining may mean you lose a valuable resource or asset.
3. **Do no harm.** There are SO many ways in which foundations think they're doing good, when actually they're causing problems. I call this delusional altruism. Next time you're about to enact a policy, or create a process, or anything else that you think will provide a benefit, run it up the flagpole with those who will be expected to comply to make sure you're not doing more harm than good.



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Creating a Culture of Respect in Philanthropy, continued

What Respectful Philanthropy Looks Like

Fortunately, for every example of disrespect in philanthropy, there are many examples of what respectful philanthropy can look like.

This example comes from one of my clients, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. It's a statement of Grantee Experience Standards that the Foundation developed after asking for and listening carefully to grantee feedback about the grantmaking process:

Grantee Experience Standards

The David and Lucile Packard Foundation wants all grantees to have a positive experience working with the Packard Foundation. We promise grantees the following:

- You will be provided with realistic expectations about the proposal process and timing.*
- You will receive a response to your email or phone inquiry (or a notification that the Foundation staff member you are contacting is out of the office) within three days.*
- When you speak to a program officer, you will receive clear communication about the subprogram strategy and where the work of your organization fits into that strategy.*
- You will receive a response to your final report within 60 days in which we acknowledge and comment briefly on the substance of your work.*

We greatly value grantee communication directly with our program staff to provide feedback on any part of the grantmaking process. If you would like to provide feedback to us directly....

You get the picture. The Packard Foundation makes it clear that they view each grantee's time and expertise as every bit as valuable as their own staff time and expertise. As the statement continues, they even offer both direct and confidential portals through which grantees are encouraged to provide feedback on their experience - with the promise of a foundation response when appropriate.

That is a great example of the culture of respect that should pervade every philanthropic institution. Kudos to the Packard Foundation, and to all of the rest of you who make respect a core part of your daily work.

As I mentioned above, the culture of disrespect is currently the exception, not the rule. But just like any other bad habit, if left unchecked it can quickly become the norm. Let's not let that happen. Let's commit to working respectfully, always.

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