

# Member Spotlight



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## METCALF FOUNDATION

In order for a community to change, the grantmakers working in that community must take on the role of catalysts for change — from fostering innovation to growing leaders to building networks.

In this month's *GEONews* Member Spotlight, we spoke with Sandy Houston, president and

CEO of the George Cedric Metcalf Charitable Foundation. Using innovative approaches to grantmaking, The Metcalf Foundation has helped to transform communities in Ontario for 50 years, focusing specifically on the performing arts, environmental programs and inclusive local economies.

### *Feeding Innovation, Assessing Risk and Handling Failure*

The very nature of the issues that grantees encounter necessitates that they be innovative and even take risks in their work. However, traditional grantmaking often discourages this type of effective innovation.

Mr. Houston says that the first step in encouraging grantmakers to be innovative is simply to explicitly invite grantees to take risks. Following that, there are a couple, more specific steps.

One, it's important to help grantees on the front end of their project in order to establish a clear vision and plan.

*"In trying to innovate, the possibility of failure is always there, and we understand that as part of the process,"*

"It's about assisting people ... to get their idea or approach in the kind of form where it's strong enough in the articulation of its possibility that we can support it," Mr. Houston said.

Secondly, it is crucial that there is a sense of trust and clear communication between the grantmaker and the grantee, especially because when it comes to innovation, nothing is a sure-shot.

"In trying to innovate, the possibility of failure is always there, and we



Sandy Houston, President and CEO of the Metcalf Foundation

### 4 Suggestions for Fostering Leaders

**Don't be positional:** Don't simply focus on the executive director. Build leadership capacity at all levels both within organizations and communities.

**Invest over the arc of a career:** Cultivating good leaders requires supporting them in their emergence, sustaining their work, and creating opportunities for renewal through their career.

**Promote thinking and reflection on leadership:** Equip emerging leaders to share their experiences in leadership. The Metcalf Foundation recently released [a paper by an Innovation Fellows](#) on how a sense of vocation informs leaders and impacts how they engage in organizational and civic renewal.

#### **Encourage intermediary organizations to emphasize leadership**

Foster a dialogue about leadership in umbrella groups that examine the philanthropy sector as a whole so that these conversations will travel across as many organizations as possible.

understand that as part of the process,” Mr. Houston said.

What remains is the persistent question of how to evaluate grantees while also encouraging them to be risk takers.

Mr. Houston’s answer is to avoid traditional assessments and to pay attention to what grantees care most about and what they perceive as most valuable.

“We’re on a journey together, and we want to learn from each other

and learn together all the way through it,” Mr. Houston said. “So we ask our grantees to tell us what they think is most worth evaluating and what they want to learn over the course of the grant.”

This approach is particularly useful if the grant deals with a complex issue that is tough to tackle. That’s because it enables the Metcalf Foundation to build in a “reflective practice” over time, allowing grantees to be both evaluating and adapting their

strategies over the arc of an initiative rather than looking back at the end.

“A lot of it is simply creating an environment with our partners and grantees where it’s understood that we are in it together,” Mr. Houston said. “The path is going to be unpredictable. We understand that, and we are prepared to accept ambiguity and uncertainty in order to get at potentially powerful new ways of thinking or doing something.”

## *The Collaborative Effect – A Case Study in Networks*

Over the last 5 years, the Metcalf Foundation has been working to create a more sustainable food system in Ontario.

They began by approaching the challenge from an environmental perspective, but they soon realized that food is an issue that involved a wide range of their programs and grantees – including organizations that focused on health, food security, environmental issues, planning, transportation and others.

After the Metcalf Foundation convened these separate organizations together around food issues, it was decided that the organizations wanted to start working in a network form.

“They were energized by the prospect of collaboration, most of them never or rarely meet each other, and they were not aware of the way that their work was potentially complimentary or

mutually reinforcing,” Mr. Houston said. Building on this opportunity to reinforce the collective efforts of their grantees, the Metcalf Foundation established a new umbrella organization called “Sustain” to act as a platform for any group working in relation to food or agriculture in Ontario.

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“At the time we did that, which was about two years ago, there were about 21 organizations involved,” Mr. Houston said. “Two years later, there are about 250 organizations involved — encompassing everything from agriculture to food security to health promotion to low-income community development to environmentalism.”

Part of what makes Sustain so powerful is the breadth of the organizations involved. This allows for its members to illuminate issues and inform each other from a broad range of perspectives. It also paves the way for these organizations to work collaboratively across a broader canvas of issues.

“The possibility to connect issues like food access to health and health promotion becomes more feasible, and environmentalists start talking to poverty activists,” Mr. Houston said.

The Metcalf Foundation’s Networking efforts around food were successful to such a degree that, Mr. Houston said, they have begun using similar strategies to “link up efforts around an issue that brings together a range of perspectives in order to make a stronger response.”