

How Do We Build and Maintain Authentic Relationships?

While we may not be able to totally remove the inherent power imbalance between grantmakers, our grantees and the communities we serve, we can take steps to build more trusting, honest and authentic relationships. By making our work about others, not ourselves, we can develop more genuine connections with grantees and communities. This can mean getting out of the office, bringing the outside into our organizations, making the necessary investments in time and resources, and leading from the top.

The Five Steps to High Empathy Grantmaking

1. Make it about others, not about you.

High-empathy grantmakers work to mitigate the power and hierarchy that can play in our relationships by always putting others' interests first. When forming strategies, policies, processes and requirements we need to ask ourselves and our stakeholders whether we are doing the right thing. We also intuitively understand how important it is that grantees and communities feel ownership of the work and priorities. As a result, we are conscious of remaining behind the scenes, and ensuring that nonprofits and community members are out front in shaping and taking credit for their work.

- As a program officer at the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Wendy Liscow goes the extra mile to show respect to grantees by doing her homework and engaging them in fruitful conversations.

For more on this topic, see [*Widespread Empathy: 5 Steps to Achieving Greater Impact in Philanthropy*](#) (Washington, D.C.: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and Jump Associates, 2011.)

“We’re not going to just spend our time talking at our site visit about what they said in their proposal and report, we’re going to talk about what matters to them. What I’ve learned is that through doing that sort of work, you can get so much deeper into what really motivates people, and what they care about in their work,” Liscow said.¹

2. Get out of the office.

It’s hard to have a deep understanding of what’s going on in a community if we’re not there. All too often, grantee reports and applications for funding are our principal source of information about community issues and the work of local nonprofits. And while many grantmakers regularly go on site visits, these can easily become stage-managed, show-and-tell sessions rather than a chance to dig deep into grantee and community challenges and concerns.

When grantmakers spend quality time in the places where our stakeholders live their lives and do their work, we are able to develop and deepen relationships and to see the world through the eyes of the people who are the focus of our efforts.

Another payoff from getting out of the office is that grantmakers can capture contextual information that often is lost in a grant proposal or over the phone. However, getting out of the office doesn’t have to be restricted to site visits, grantmakers can interact with grantees by volunteering and serving on nonprofit boards and in community government and in civic organizations.

As a caveat, grantmakers considering ways to build deeper relationships with grantees should remember to always be conscious of our impact on the capacity of grantees to stay focused on their work. It can be a fine line for deeply engaged grantmakers to walk, but stronger connections and openness to listening and hearing grantee concerns are almost always welcome; interfering in grantees’ day-to-day operations is not.

- Over the last few years, the Greater New Orleans Foundation has gradually shifted from a traditional community grantmaking approach — focused on serving donors and responding to grant requests — to becoming a more active partner with others in community problem-solving. According to the foundation’s President and CEO Albert Ruesga, the main spark for the shift was Hurricane Katrina.

¹ Phil Buchanan, Ellie Buteau and Timothy Chu, [“Working with Grantees: The Keys to Success and Five Program Officers Who Exemplify Them,”](#) Center for Effective Philanthropy, 2010.

“That really brought it home to everyone here that we are the community, and the community is us,” Ruesga said. “We all live here, and we all care about the future of this place, and so we’re committed to rolling up our sleeves and being out in the community and working alongside the people we serve.”

3. Bring the outside in.

Grantmakers are often seen as disconnected from the realities of local communities and grassroots work. High-empathy foundations actively try to remove the barriers that can contribute to isolation and anonymity in the communities we serve. To get a better picture of the on-the-ground work, grantmakers can bring the people who know the community best into the foundation — either by hiring them, inviting them to join the board or by having them interact with the board and staff in formal and informal settings. Whether they are nonprofit executive directors and staff, or representatives of the communities that are the focus of our grantmaking, having such people on-board allows us to immediately understand the real-world impact of grantmaking decisions and activities.

- The Meyer Foundation in Washington, D.C., most program officers have served as nonprofit executive directors. Thus each team member is able to execute grants with an inherent understanding of what it’s like to be on the other side of the funding table.

4. Invest in what it takes.

Another way that grantmakers can make the shift to high-empathy is through prioritizing relationship-building practices — this means providing adequate time and resources to ensure that grantees and community members can be engaged in the grantmaking process. This could require investing in new processes, new systems and new strategies to nurture deeper connections. It is important to note that for some grantmakers, creating widespread empathy in our organizations may also require stepped-up investments in operations, starting with staff that work most closely with grantees and community members.

- The Marguerite Casey Foundation holds its quarterly board meetings in communities across the country where its grantees are working. In addition to their business meeting, board members of the Seattle-based grantmaker spend a “learning day” in the community where they meet with grantees, visit their programs and talk to community members.

5. Lead from the top.

One of the most essential characteristics of high-empathy funders is a leadership team that fosters an organization wide commitment by walking the talk and demonstrating high-empathy behaviors in everyday work. To change the culture and overarching strategies of a foundation, the board and senior staff must embrace widespread empathy as a pathway to better results for the organization and its stakeholders.

Leaders can start by reviewing our own work practices to assess the extent to which we use high-empathy practices, like building relationships, getting out of the office and checking our egos at the door. In too many foundations, program staff members are overwhelmed and grant portfolios are too large. Foundation leaders can ensure that systems and processes are in place to provide staff with the flexibility needed to learn from grantees and community members and make changes in response to our understanding of what's happening on the ground.

- During his time as president and CEO of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, David Grant observed that grantees seemed overwhelmed by the grant assessment process. In response, he convened a group of grantees to discuss how the process assessment and reporting could be made less burdensome while still contributing to the learning and improvement of programs. Ultimately, Grant used insight from this group of grantees to develop a workshop series that enabled grantees to chart a path to higher levels of performance and impact.

Conclusion

Building and maintaining authentic relationships through high-empathy grantmaking is about removing the barriers that exist between a grantmaking organization and the outside world. It is about closing the gap between those who are inside the foundation and those who are outside. To be sure, developing these kinds of relationships takes time, resources and leadership but ultimately, it pays dividends by helping create stronger nonprofits that can more effectively meet community needs.