



ACCOUNTABILITY *as*

TELLING OUR STORY

By Colin G. Campbell

What does this new emphasis on accountability imply for family foundations, which constitute such a substantial share of the philanthropic community at large? ... I am fully and appreciatively aware of how personal and, indeed, intimate an enterprise a family foundation is. I also respect the fact that donor families often have strong feelings about preserving their privacy, even—or especially—when they are acting in the public good. I am in no sense prepared to recommend that we sacrifice the distinctive character of family foundations for the sake of greater accountability.

Fortunately, I do not believe such a sacrifice will be necessary... but I do believe that when a family forms a foundation and begins to enjoy the financial advantages and freedoms that are attendant to the conduct of organized philanthropy, it embraces a significant public trust. And with that public trust comes responsibility—the responsibility to follow basic legal and ethical standards of philanthropic practice, and to make available information that enables the public and its representatives to determine whether or not such standards are being followed...

It is true that the word “accountability” is most often associated with mathematical activities—probably because of its similarity to the words “accounting” and “accountant.” Being accountable, we think, means proving that everything “adds up;” showing that we “measure up” on some scale of performance.

No one can deny that accountability has its quantitative aspects. But accountability also comes with a second set of associations that ought to be far more appealing and comfortable to family foundations. For in addition to taking a measurement, accountability means giving an account of yourself—put simply, it means telling your story. It is accountability’s association with storytelling that I believe represents such an exciting opportunity for family foundations...



One thing today's family philanthropists can do is to tell their stories more publicly and openly, to circulate widely the values, lessons, and examples that will inspire and enable tomorrow's family donors to follow in their footsteps. Family traditions—including traditions of philanthropy and service—are communicated largely through stories told by one generation to the next. By becoming storytellers, family foundations speak not only to new generations of their own donor families but also to others who will be in a position to inherit or dispose of substantial wealth...

[F]ocusing on the storytelling function of accountability should also help allay fears of undue conformity or constriction. By telling their stories, families actually enhance their sense of uniqueness and cohesion. I believe too that the effort to tell such stories, far from promoting sameness, can encourage foundations to describe themselves more precisely and specifically. It can help clarify a foundation's mission and character and culture. It can bring out individuality and distinctiveness. As American business has discovered, the need to be more accountable, to take account of new realities and give a better account of oneself, can produce not uniformity but a more focused, flexible, and purposeful set of enterprises...

(From Telling our Story: Accountability for Family Foundations, Council on Foundations: 1996.)

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