



Sharing and Shifting Power in Family Philanthropy—Board Conversation Starters

It goes without saying: with money, comes power. Those who are born into, or work in, family philanthropy have and hold a certain amount of power, whether they are conscious of it or not. There's a power divide between those who have money and those who need it; those who have historically been able to accumulate and preserve wealth, and those who didn't have similar opportunities to do so; those who have the name, reputation, and influence to effect change, and those who do not.

Within their position of power, family funders have a rare and important opportunity to address the imbalances as best they can—and to lift up the voices, longings, and leadership of people and communities who historically have lacked power.

What does it mean for a family funder to share and shift power?

Here are ideas and questions to help guide an internal discussion on how your policies and practices affect the power dynamics of your philanthropy, and what you can do to alleviate this in your grantmaking, governance, and management practices. Start with one section at a time, individually or as a group, to prompt these important considerations.

In families...

- Explore the history of how the family accumulated wealth, and how the foundation might help heal any historical injustices.
- Model truth-telling about your own biases, blind spots, and comfort levels when it comes to money, privilege, and responsibility.

Ask yourselves:

- How did our family accumulate its wealth? At what expense to other communities, groups, or our planet?
- What identities and roles do we carry as individuals, as a family, as a legacy, as a family name?
- How do we see ourselves? How do others see us?
- We experience privilege when... [fill in the blank].
- How comfortable are we talking about our race, social status, economic status, gender identities with each other, within the family? Outside the family?

- What's our responsibility/obligation to those who haven't experienced the same power and privilege as we have?
- What are our blind spots? Who can we ask about our blind spots (who will tell us the truth)?

In governance...

- Consider a mission and program purpose that creates room for communities to build power themselves.
- Diversify the people and perspectives on your board, giving them equal voice and vote. Support them in staying grounded and accountable to the communities they come from.
- Be sure that foundation policies and systems support true diversity, equity, and inclusion—in both words and action.
- Consider the ways that perpetuity perpetuates power. Explore ways the foundation might eventually transfer wealth to the community or causes aligned with your mission.

Ask yourselves:

- How does our mission and strategy self-empower the people and communities we most want to support?
- How do we make sure our board (and staff) have access to all of the information they need to do their jobs well?
- How can we include people who don't look like us, and also support them in sharing their wisdom and staying true to the communities they represent?
- What policies and practices do we have (and need) on diversity, equity, and inclusion? How often do we revisit these policies and practices? What outside expertise can we engage to make sure we are “walking our talk”?
- How often do we revisit our policies around spending and perpetuity? What are the biggest benefits to perpetuity—to our family, to our institution, to the communities we serve? In what ways could “defaulting” to perpetuity actually thwart our mission over time, by holding onto resources that could make rapid change?

In grantmaking...

- Examine and be transparent about your processes—how you ask for and vet proposals, how you monitor grants, the reporting you require, how you evaluate grantees, and how you make decisions.
- Go to grantees. Rather than ask grantees to come to you, visit them at their own place of work or a neutral location, when possible, that is convenient and comfortable.
- Consider going beyond grants. In what ways can you give community members direct access to your foundation (without a nonprofit as the go-between)?
- Transfer decision-making power to the community. Invite advisory boards or community members to participate in or own decision making that affects them.

Ask yourselves:

- How clear and transparent are we about our grant guidelines and grantmaking process—including how the board makes its decisions and evaluates grants? Can grantees and the public find this information on our website?
- Where are we asking grantees to jump through unnecessary (and perhaps costly) hoops? What can we do differently?
- How accessible are we to grantees and potential grantees who have questions throughout the grantmaking process?
- What relationships have we built with grantees? How comfortable are grantees in telling us the truth or sharing their mistakes and learning?
- How often, and in what forums, do we share our own mistakes and learning?
- How do we invite, include, engage community members as advisors and in our decision making? In what ways might we yield our own decision-making power to build the power of others?

In management and internal operations...

- Look at where your foundation is located. Is it accessible to grantees and the communities you support? Is it warm and welcoming?
- Be clear about who you will hire, and your processes for hiring. Reach out beyond your typical networks to identify a range of diverse candidates.
- Use tools such as the fee-based [Intercultural Development Inventory](#) for staff and board to assess the foundation's intercultural competency.

Ask yourselves:

- How do we show up as funders in the community?
- Does our office location and management practices reflect and support the communities we serve?
- How clear and transparent are we in our hiring, management, and performance evaluation policies and practices? How do they reflect our values?

- What tools can we use to assess ourselves and our foundation? (See the Resources section below for ideas.)

In how you communicate externally...

- Identify and name inherent power dynamics, and create space for balancing these dynamics in whatever way possible.
- Ask grantees for feedback about the foundation and how it is performing. Create a rapport and relationship where grantees feel comfortable coming to you with the truth.
- Consider ways your foundation is unknowingly or consciously withholding information and learnings. Learn more by reading *The Link Between Transparency, Privilege, and Power in Family Philanthropy*.

Ask yourselves:

- How can we respectfully identify and speak to the inherent power dynamics present between funders and grantees and community members—in meetings, in the community, and with our philanthropic colleagues?
- In what ways can we use our power and privilege for the benefit of others?
- In what ways can grantees give us honest feedback? How often do we ask them?
- How transparent are we as a foundation? How does our level of transparency affect our strategy and our relationships with others?
- In what ways can we support grantees in communicating their stories and needs?

Resources to Learn More

To learn more on this topic, check out the following resources:

NCFP Knowledge Center

[Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion.](#)

NCFP Content Collection includes a variety of perspectives and tools for addressing REDI issues.

[Balancing Power Dynamics.](#) NCFP's Family Philanthropy Webinar Series: February 14, 2019.

Books

Orosz, Joel (2000). *The Insider's Guide to Grantmaking: How Foundations Find, Fund, and Manage Effective Programs*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Shams-Lau, Jessamyn; Leu, Jane; Le, Vu (2018). *Unicorns Unite: How Nonprofits and Foundations Can Build Epic Partnerships*. England: Red Press.

Villanueva, Edgar (2018). *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Excerpted from Bridging the Power Divide: How Family Funders Share and Shift Power, by Elaine Gast Fawcett, contributing author to NCFP, Passages Issue Brief, October 2019: ncfp.org.

Toolkits, Reports, and Articles

Deciding Together: Shifting Power and Resources Through Participatory Grantmaking. Grantcraft by Candid., 2018.

Generosity and Impact Aren't Enough. Let's Judge Philanthropy on How Well It Shifts Power. Inside Philanthropy, 2019: insidephilanthropy.org

Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens: An Introduction. Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE): racialequity.org.

Is Grantmaking Getting Smarter? Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2017.

Power Moves: Your Essential Philanthropy Assessment Guide for Equity and Justice. National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, May 2018.

Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide: Embracing Equity, 7 Steps to Advance and Embed Race Equity and Inclusion Within Your Organization. Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015.

Related Organizations and Websites

Building Movement Project: buildingmovement.org

Edge Funders Network: edgefunders.org

Glasspockets by Candid.: glasspockets.org

Intercultural Development Inventory: idiinventory.com

Nonprofit AF: nonprofitaf.com

Peery Foundation (Grantee-Centric Philanthropy): peeryfoundation.org/grantee-centric

Racial Equity Tools: racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/power_privilege.pdf

Resource Generation: resourcegeneration.org

Youth Giving: youthgiving.org

Trust-Based Philanthropy Project: trustbasedphilanthropy.org