

Tying Practices to Values: From Words to Action at Bainum Family Foundation

To transform the practice of philanthropy into the practice of principled grantmaking, we worked with our members to develop five Principles for Peak Grantmaking—Tie Practices to Values; Narrow the Power Gap; Drive Equity; Learn, Share, Evolve; and Steward Responsively. *Learn more at peakgrantmaking.org/principles.*

Through our Case Story series, we tap the wisdom, candor, and experience of PEAK Grantmaking members who generously share their journeys to advance principled grantmaking practices by applying these Principles. In this Case Story, we focus on the Principle, Tie Practices to Values.



Tie Practices to Values

Link grantmaking practices with grantmaker values, integrating values throughout every aspect of grantmaking, to walk the talk and propel the mission.

Centered in Values

Headquartered in Bethesda, MD, the Bainum Family Foundation seeks to help children exit poverty by providing educational opportunities and other support needed for lifelong success. Late entrepreneur and philanthropist Stewart Bainum established the operating foundation in 1968. Since then, Bainum Family Foundation's strategies have evolved, while keeping Mr. Bainum's legacy and values central to the enterprise. Today, the Foundation's initiatives — developed and delivered in collaboration with carefully selected partners — improve the quality and availability of resources for children living in poverty.

Working primarily in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, the Foundation has annual giving of approximately \$25 million per year.

Bainum Family Foundation Organization Values

The following core values form the fabric of our culture and are informed by the Foundation's founders.

Continuous Learning

Embrace change and pursue growth

- Seek opportunities to broaden knowledge and experience
- Intentionally reflect
- Integrate new insights and feedback

Integrity

Be authentic and consistent

- Align words and actions
- Own successes and mistakes
- Speak the truth that is constructive

Collaboration

Connect and unite around shared purpose

- Recognize and maximize the strengths of all stakeholders
- Listen actively and openly
- Find and implement solutions together

Commitment

Be accountable and persistent

- Know when to stay the course and when to adapt
- Fully engage and follow through



As a leader in tying practices to values, the Bainum Family Foundation abides by these three principles:

1. The Foundation is guided by publicly shared, explicitly stated values.

Like many family foundations, the Bainum Family Foundation has been guided implicitly, from the start, by the life story and core beliefs of its founder.

Stewart Bainum knew firsthand the role that education can play as a pathway out of poverty. Having been asked to leave his faith-based boarding school in Mount Vernon, Ohio, at the height of the Great Depression, because he could not pay the tuition, Mr. Bainum traveled to Washington, D.C., where jobs were more plentiful. There, he found work as a plumber's assistant. After earning enough to pay his tuition, he returned to high school in Ohio and graduated in 1938. Back in D.C., his persistence drove a series of diverse business enterprises, from plumbing to real estate development to nursing homes. Perhaps best known among Mr. Bainum's successes is Choice Hotels International, one of the world's largest hotel franchising companies.

Thanks to his success in business, Mr. Bainum and his family were in a position to give back, first through what was known as The College Foundation, later the Commonweal Foundation, and, today, the Bainum Family Foundation. Having personally experienced the challenges facing financially strapped students, Mr. Bainum's philanthropic interests focused on scholarships and other educational opportunities for children from low-income families and disadvantaged neighborhoods in Washington, D.C.

Serving as the Foundation's Chair of the Board, CEO and President, Mr. Bainum brought the same enthusiasm to philanthropy that he brought to his businesses, his faith, his family, and his community. In 2008, Mr. Bainum's daughter Barbara Bainum transitioned into the role of board chair, CEO and president, and began looking for ways to render the Foundation's implicit values both explicit and enduring.

According to Foundation staff who witnessed it, Ms. Bainum started by focusing on organizational culture, making the connections between a healthy workplace environment and the impact they wanted to achieve. Ms. Bainum led an intentional effort to state their values explicitly, beginning with family discussions that then moved to the board, and then to senior Foundation leadership.

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This inclusive process, engaging both family and staff, articulated the values that informed and inspired the Foundation's work. Words like persistence, integrity, growth, and learning emerged from family members, who had the greatest insight into Mr. Bainum's personal values and life story. Senior staff added collaboration, drawn from their unique relationship with the founder.

Once family members, senior leadership, and staff had identified a set of values, Barbara Bainum worked with senior leaders and board members to define exactly what these values meant in the context of the Bainum Family Foundation.



2. The Foundation examines implicit and aspirational values to ensure alignment with organizational culture, norms, behaviors, policies, and practices.

Values do not always translate immediately into well-understood, consistent behaviors and norms. To make the leap from stated values to lived values, Barbara Bainum supported her staff's resolve to delve more deeply into questions of alignment and culture. Director of Operations Amanda Smith explains: "We knew that Barbara, as well as the family and senior leadership, shared the staff's commitment to see those values live in the Foundation. "

A staff engagement survey offered the push they needed. The survey sought to gauge just how accountable the foundation was being to its values, asking questions like, Does leadership embody the foundation's values? and Do my fellow staff members consistently embody the foundation's values? As Senior Director of Talent and Organizational Development Rebecca Cisek describes, "We knew that our values would only become important to the work, internally and externally, if we were holding people accountable for following them."

Surprisingly, it was not low marks on these questions that gave human resources and operations teams pause; instead, it was consistently neutral responses. Neutral responses suggested that these values were not compelling strong reactions in either direction: They were still just words on paper. Staff focus groups confirmed the team's hunch. Without clarity regarding the meaning of their values, the survey response was a collective "meh."

"We didn't know how to embody these values because we hadn't clearly defined them in practice, or across the different teams and interests of the organization," said Cisek. On the human resources side, the Foundation knew it could not assess employees on criteria they had not yet fully defined. Beyond performance reviews, there was potential for confusion in day-to-day work as colleagues interpreted values alignment on their own. As Smith explains: "Some folks might think they are being highly collaborative while others could easily disagree. Because they have a different definition of 'collaboration,' no one was right or wrong: We just hadn't talked through our different interpretations and arrived at a collective understanding."

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Talking through values can be more challenging within a family foundation, where values are strongly linked to the founder and family. "That's why Barbara Bainum's support was so important: She didn't want us to shy away from the conversations, or just accept the values 'from above.'" said Cisek. "She wanted us to grapple with meaning and behaviors — she knew this was how values would become embedded in our culture."

With Ms. Bainum's support, the team developed a process that gave staff the opportunities to talk through the Foundation's values and arrive at a shared understanding.

"We knew we needed to get the whole staff involved, so we leveraged an already scheduled retreat in the fall of 2017," said Cisek. "Staff divided into small groups, using worksheets that stated the core values and asked each group to answer seemingly simple questions about them: What do we mean? What do we not mean? What should we mean? What, specifically, should this look like internally? Externally? What are the barriers to successfully living our values?" Everyone shared their answers anonymously on Post-it notes, and notes were sorted around common themes, and divided among successes and barriers, inside and outside.

To facilitate more open and candid conversations, staff were divided into small groups, and groups were given separate rooms; in addition, senior leadership were set apart in their own group. As Smith remembers, the approach "helped everyone feel safe to discuss real experiences and, importantly, to go deeply into practice — to get beyond the aspirational and superficial to what was really standing in our way."

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The retreat proved to be a watershed moment in Bainum's values journey. Where the staff landed was important, but even more important was that the staff arrived there together, developing a common language that connected their values to the lived experience of the Foundation, internally and externally.

To maintain enthusiasm, a Core Values Working Group was established with volunteers from all staffing levels and teams, tasked with analyzing data collected from engagement surveys and the staff retreat. Through consensus, the group identified main themes and priorities for next steps.

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Recommendations, including a set of behaviors representative of each value, were presented to the executive team, the board, and finally, the family. While a few tweaks were made along the way, the efforts of the Working Group were approved and celebrated. Over the last year, the Foundation has begun integrating values and related behaviors into daily work. The performance management system was updated to cover core values and how they're lived by each staff member, reinforcing accountability. Staff whose actions embody core values in exceptional ways are now rewarded – and because everyone understands, and feels invested in, the Foundation's values, these rewards are meaningful and highly regarded.

Cisek and Smith agreed that the support of board and executive leadership, in both seating a Core Values Working Group and following their recommendations, has been a key to Bainum's success.

3. The Foundation recognizes grantmaking practitioners as integral to the pursuit of values-aligned strategy.



Following this breakthrough, in late 2018, the Bainum Family Foundation authorized the operations team to take the next step: aligning practices with values.

The Foundation has embarked upon a whole-organization, cross-functional effort to examine its funding practices and ensure alignment with organizational culture, values, and strategy. Led by Smith, and guided by an executive team and consultants, the project considers how grantmaking can be most effective, how systems can be developed to encourage continual learning and improvement, and how practices can be benchmarked against best practice.

Gathering insight from program managers, operations, grant managers, legal counsel, and funded partners, Bainum Family Foundation is asking those closest to each step in the process not just to improve the process, but to consider how each step advances Bainum Family Foundation values.

What's Next

Though Stewart Bainum passed away in February 2014, his legacy lives on through the Bainum Family Foundation, in no small part because of Foundation-wide efforts to embed core values into their culture and operations.

The Bainum Family Foundation's efforts to live their values is an ongoing, organic process: There is no final product to be wrapped in a bow. Improving everyone's understanding of and accountability to core values was an essential first step. Since those core values have taken root, however, more values-focused activities have sprouted.

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Just this spring, the Foundation released an RFP for consulting support to improve its competency and efficacy in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). To cultivate individual and collective DEI capacity, Bainum is committing to a sustained effort that includes an organizational assessment, individual and group training and coaching, and refining both internal processes and external relationships. The ultimate goal is to infuse a DEI lens "into everything we do."

Additionally, this past July, the Foundation welcomed Jacquelyn Davis as its new CEO and President (with Barbara Bainum continuing in her role as Chair of the Board). "As we were preparing for this transition, Jacquelyn shared that she was drawn to our organization because of our core values,"



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Practice meets purpose at PEAK Grantmaking, a member-led national association of more than 4,000 professionals who specialize in grants management for funding organizations. Our members come together to form a vibrant community of grantmaking practice that advances shared leadership and learning across the sector. By cultivating resources, learning opportunities, and collaborations across the philanthropic spectrum, we champion grantmaking practices designed to help funders of every size and type maximize their mission-driven work through living their values.

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says Cisek. "And she has already shown her intention to embody continuous learning, integrity, collaboration and commitment in our upcoming strategic planning process and all other endeavors as we move forward — to honor the legacy of Mr. Bainum and the family and to also ensure continuity for an organization in transition."

It's not yet clear when each bud will come into full bloom, but the Bainum Family Foundation's commitment to living their core values is certain to result in new ideas, stronger relationships, and more effective practice.

Contributors

Rebecca Cisek, Ed.D., is Senior Director, Talent and Organizational Development, for the Bainum Family Foundation, where she oversees the health and development of the overall work culture and provides one-on-one coaching to leaders and staff to further enhance team and individual growth.

Amanda Smith is Director of Operations for the Bainum Family Foundation, where she maximizes operational effectiveness for the organization—leading the creation, maintenance and analysis of systems, policies and procedures.

Rebecca and Amanda were interviewed by Elizabeth Myrick, principal of Elizabeth Myrick & Associates Consulting, LLC. For over two decades, Elizabeth has worked with grantmakers and philanthropy-serving organizations to build leaders and cultures that learn and grow, serving as a guide, coach, and project manager to help analyze and implement strategies, collect and synthesize data, tackle organizational challenges, and measure impact.