1. Build Strong Relationships with Communities

> *"If we share what we don't know and want to learn together with leaders in the neighborhood, perhaps there is the possibility of an authentic relationship in the communities."*
>
> ***—David Portillo***

One of the easiest things to say about many aspects of foundation work is that relationships are critical. But while many people recognize the importance of building strong relationships, they also report that the reality is that relationships often break down or never really develop.

In Chicago, many people talked about the importance of relationships and the need to build the trust that underlies strong relationships. And many talked about how hard it is to build these relationships between funders and people who live in struggling communities. Those interviewed for this report also had a lot to say about relationships between funders and community people.

Their basic messages were pretty straightforward. While it's hard for funders to build honest relationships with anyone they are funding, it is particularly hard to do so with people who live in low-income communities, for reasons that go beyond the disparity in income and power.

But while it isn't easy, it is critical to invest the time and personal capital to forge as good of relationships as you can with people who live in the communities you are supporting. People spoke quite passionately about why these relationships are so critical. They talked about the need to build trust and overcome a history of disappointment and skepticism, the knowledge that these relationships can bring (both to the funders and to a community's leaders) and the important roles relationships can play in bringing about system change. Some people also emphasized the importance of funders nurturing relationships *within* these communities.

In relation to how to build relationships, people also had a lot to say. They talked about the need to devote time and to make a long-term commitment. Many emphasized the need to develop the capacity to simply listen to people, even when they are expressing frustration. Others talked about the reality that, as with any relationship, you have to keep at it, working through the inevitable differences.

A few people talked about the importance of who represents the funder and whether they live in the community or have other connections to that community. Several people

This is one of a series of reports exploring topics that emerged from a Grassroots Grantmakers "on-the-ground" meeting in Chicago in September 2008. At this meeting, more than 50 grantmakers came together to examine issues involving their support for community residents as they build the power and capacity of their neighborhoods. These reports—which involved in-depth follow-up interviews with six grantmakers who were at this Chicago meeting—are available at *www.GrassrootsGrantmakers.org*.

talked about the barrier that can be created by the complex language that funders often use. Finally, the challenge of honesty in these relationships came up frequently, with people offering several suggestions for achieving more honesty between funders and community people.

Why is it so hard to build strong relationships with residents of struggling communities?

The reality that all funders face is that they start every relationship with a grantee from a place of inequality. They control money. The grantees need that money to run their programs. As someone put it in Chicago, "The foundation always will have the money and the agency is always down here. There will be no level relationship. You have to be realistic about that."

But this inequality is particularly pronounced when funders work in very low-income communities. "There is the wealth of the foundation vs. the need of the community," explained Jones. As someone else put it in Chicago: "We are a welcome dollar sign in a neighborhood."

The Steans Foundation's **Alison Janus** says, "There is the power differential. There are race and class issues….a whole host of things. They are there and they're not going away, so let's deal with them."

Others pointed out that another reason it is hard for a funder to build relationships with low-income communities is history. Most of these communities have seen funders and initiatives before.

Lisa Leverette

The Skillman Foundation of Detroit: small grant program coordinator contracted through the Prevention Network (the intermediary), Lansing, Michigan

An intermediary and Coordinator of Skillman's Community Connections Grant Program, Lisa Leverette considers herself a "translator" between two worlds. It's a role that goes beyond understanding the languages of both community and foundation. It also involves building relationships, a process that requires her not only to connect verbally but also through her physical presence.

Educating the community about grant opportunities through Skillman is "not as simple as a workshop every three months," says Leverette. "I'm literally in people's living rooms, talking to applicants of the grant program before, throughout and beyond their project."

She's conscious of the role that physical presence—particularly in relation to space—plays in making grassroots grants effective. During "On the Ground" in Chicago, she reflected on the "use of space" and how the "physical layout" of a neighborhood and "blight" can affect a community.

The importance of having space in which to congregate and plan "and have some control over" was even more obvious to her. "Being able to find a space like a church basement has value to it."

"I'm not working with a blank slate," explained **Lisa Leverette** who works with The Skillman Foundation. "It's very difficult to build a relationship with someone who has been through this before. They often feel jaded and suspicious, which makes it much harder for me to prove myself. And then I have to speak for something bigger than me, which is the foundation. You are constantly reassuring folks. You must come in and offer something and be able to deliver it."

Sometimes the skepticism goes beyond one prior disappointing initiative by a funder, a point that the Wean Founda-

tion's **Jennifer Roller** made. Her foundation focuses on what many refer to as the "rust belt" Ohio communities of Warren and Youngstown, where the economy collapsed more than a generation ago.

"For years as a community we were looking for the next big industry. You had politicians promising the next big thing. They promised prisons, government administration, air freight, etc. Then the plans would fall through and folks became less hopeful.

"People then didn't believe the city could make a turnaround or that even a notable foundation could make a difference."

Why it's so important to build strong relationships

Youngstown and Warren are similar in ways to nearly every struggling, low-income community in the country: their economic base collapsed at least a generation ago and, while many people and institutions have promised many things, no one has been able to really do something about this core problem. The result is often a high level of skepticism and a very low level of trust.

Which is the key reason why building relationships is where you have to start, Roller believes. "It is so important to develop trust." You start to develop that trust by "helping people feel that they have access," Roller says. In the past, she says, "Folks haven't had access to develop relationships."

Roller's Neighborhood Success program is not simply about supporting residents to address neighborhood concerns. It is also about developing leaders. She believes you do that by developing relationships with leaders as well as encouraging relationships among leaders. "With our grant-making committee, we build relationships and nurture those relationships across communities.

"With them on the committees, they bring experiences to the table that we do not have. They bring new programs onto our radar. They are ambassadors for the program, making referrals and encouraging groups to submit applications." These leaders begin to influence how resources are used and shape what is going on in their communities in concrete ways. Over time this kind of access builds trust and overcomes skepticism, Roller believes.

At The Denver Foundation, leaders developed through its small grants program have gained access to many other parts of the foundation, according to Program Officer David Portillo. A few joined the foundation's Oversight Committee. Their contributions were so significant that the foundation decided that half the people on that committee would not be from the foundation.

"Community leaders have attracted the attention of the foundation as a whole," Portillo

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says, with several sitting on other foundation committees. One leader eventually became the foundation's board chair.

For a community foundation like this one, these kinds of relationships with community members are essential, Portillo believes. "Community foundations have been seen as funding work in communities. So it's important to be in the community to listen and ask questions and build relationships over multiple years. That accessibility and engagement are keys to this work."

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>
> *—Andy Helmboldt*

Nearly everyone interviewed testified to the necessity of building relationships with community people. "You can't do anything of value without them," said the Steans Foundation's **Alison Janus**. "It is everything. It is about trust, about understanding where people are coming from. You are the guest coming from outside. You have to gain that person's trust and respect before you can realistically expect to gain something."

Leverette says that building relationships with people living in the communities you are supporting is "tremendously important." She explains, "This is ground zero for kids and communities. It is where they are spending time. Their relationships are here. People who care for them are here."

By being in these communities, by building relationships with the people who live in these communities, a funder's understanding grows exponentially, according to those who have been doing this work for years.

Leverette offered a simple example of why this level of understanding is important. "A grassroots applicant might need a grant and one third of the budget is for food. Someone without knowledge of the nutritional needs of youth in this community might balk at such an expense. But in actuality it is fundamental to impacting the nutrition needs of a child and is culturally significant."

Having good relationships in a community can also be critically important in relation to communications, helping counter misinformation, Leverette believes. "Someone in the community can say something negative and once that starts it spreads like wildfire. This can shut down a process. When misinformation is out, I have to get down on the ground and correct it."

Andy Helmboldt, a volunteer for The Battle Creek Foundation's neighborhood grants program, also talks about the importance of a funder having "a more direct connection to the problem and the people working on it." He says that the key is what you learn. "You learn about problems you may not have known existed." You also get "a small glimpse into what life is like for others in different situations."

This glimpse not only increases understanding, it can also create a sense of connection, Helmboldt believes. "We live in the same world, supposedly with access to the same things. So why is it working for me and not for this other person? I get the feeling that taking part in this committee is helping people feel we are all in the same boat."

These connections with community people not only give foundations more knowledge, they also can transform how community people see a funder. "As we build relationships, the face of the foundation transforms in people's minds," Leverette thinks. The foundation is seen as an individual with whom a community person can have a relationship. While a foundation can make many people very anxious, an individual with whom a community person has a relationship can change this. "We are not intimidating," Leverette adds.

These relationships also have a very practical impact, helping community people plan their work, write proposals and run their projects, Leverette believes. She says that a workshop every three months won't get it done. "I'm literally in people's living rooms, talking to applicants before, throughout and beyond their project." She helps people understand "how to move within the structure and the bureaucracy."

By engaging with people at this level, a funder is doing more than improving the odds that a specific project will succeed. That funder is also helping community people develop the capacity to change their own communities, which is what many funders think matters the most.

Woods Fund's Consuella Brown goes even further, saying that, "Without relationships, you cannot create system change.

"I think relationships are at the foundation of anything that might be moved forward because you are building an avenue for dialogue and the possibility of trust." Brown says that, for her, foundation work is about advancing ideas that "can make a tangible difference for people." You advance ideas by building credibility and developing one-on-one relationships. Through these relationships, you can create understanding and work on ideas together.

When a funder builds relationships with community people, these relationships become first steps. People can then build other relationships with people outside their communities, people who can help change the policies and systems that aren't working for these communities.

Plus, without relationships with communities, funders have no hope of creating change, Brown believes. "I am under no illusion that my sitting in the offices of the Woods Fund

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Rey Lopez-Calderon of Alianza Leadership Institute urged foundations to "be wary hyper-scientific ways of measuring community."

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"Anyone who understands this business knows that foundations are only as good as the work of their grantees. Without the grantees, we have no voice."

It is not just the relationships that a funder may nurture between community people and policymakers that can lead to change, it is also the relationships a funder can stimulate *within* a community, believes The Battle Creek Foundation's Helmboldt. He says that these "incredibly important" relationships are "the focus of our neighborhood grant program." Why?

"What holds people back is the anonymity of being alone. They see the obvious problems but they don't see anyone else caring about fixing them." Pulling together people who want to fix these problems becomes critical, Helmboldt believes. "If you are going to be doing any kind of grassroots change, the more roots you have the better."

Over time, he says the idea is to "bring neighbors together to empower them to take responsibility to take control of their own neighborhood. But no one will do it if they feel they are the only one who feels that way."

How can you build strong relationships with communities?

One of the encouraging aspects of the Chicago meeting, according to many participants, was the amount of knowledge that many funders now have about how to build relationships in these communities, the result of the fact that people have now been doing this work for many years. People had many ideas about how to overcome the barriers to building strong relationships between funders and community people.

One idea is simply to understand that building these relationships takes time and a long-term commitment. Indeed, this is why understanding the importance of relationships is critical: only if funders understand this will they be willing to make the commitment needed to build these relationships.

As one person said in Chicago, "You can't think that just going to a church meeting one time is enough for them to 'get' you and you to 'get' them. It will take time. But it seems like people want something right now…like they are microwaving a meal. You need six months to even get to some of this trust."

"You need to really, really take your time," says Janus, who has been working in North Lawndale for three years. She says you need to build a space where there is trust. "You have to work hard at it. You have to protect that space and listen."

And like any relationship, the building process never really stops. "The relationships are definitely possible," Janus believes. "But it's never this perfect thing. You can get some honest interactions, but you will step on toes and there will be hurt feelings. There is a lot to negotiate."

Leverette agrees about the time it takes. She also thinks that relationships between funders and community are possible "if everyone is committed and accountable" *and* "if you're not on a timeline with a specific agenda to get somewhere.

"These timetables just kill people. The relationship has to evolve organically with its bruises and bumps along the way. You will have difficulties and disagreement. That is part of the process. When that happens, we have to be patient in getting back on the road.

"It's a lot of work…. But foundations are used to a straight line with a plan and strategy to get there. If it's not doing what they think it needs to be doing, they often want to pull up stakes or change the direction. Or they want to put people into the straight line. But you can't do it that way."

Roller believes that the time it takes to build relationships needs to be seen as a key part of the funder's job. She believes that going to potluck dinners, block watch meetings or other community functions "is part of my workday. I place as much emphasis on these gatherings as going to meetings where one would believe there is more 'influence.'"

One reason it takes time to build these relationships is that a critical part of the process is taking time to listen to people, an idea that came up often. The need to listen is certainly true of any relationship. But in a relationship involving so much disparity, several people said that listening becomes even more important.

As one person put it in Chicago, "What you think we need is not always what we do need. You have to listen to us and not have your own agenda. You have to be patient and not expect things to get done quickly."

Another person said something very similar in Chicago. "Funders need to seek to understand first rather than come with their own agenda because of the power dynamic. Every group wants you just to listen to them. Because you have the power, you need to understand them first, with them understanding you later."

It's also important to listen not just for the problems that exist in a community, but also for the assets and abilities that all communities possess. "Many funders convene people to hear their complaints. But you also want to listen for what is good and what they can do," is how one person put this in Chicago. "Anytime a foundation comes in with a deficit

attitude, that is not good," said another participant. "Their attitude needs to change."

Once again, listening to people requires time, another point made in Chicago. "People in our neighborhood are not used to being listened to. To begin to speak up and say what they want is going to be really challenging."

How can you encourage people to speak up? A big part of it, several people said, is being there over a long enough period of time that people begin to feel comfortable with you. Part of it is simply being willing to be in the community.

Part of it is who represents the foundation. Foundations "need translators who bridge the divide between people in the community and the foundation," is how one person put it in Chicago. Another person said that, "You have to send people who look like us or who live here."

Roller has lived in Ohio's Mahoning Valley her whole life. "My presence here at the foundation is a prime example of putting your money where your mouth is when it comes to building the capacity of the Mahoning Valley. People know my family. I follow through and I have maintained good relationships. People can count on me being part of this community."

Through her, they have access to the foundation. "I think access is very important. Our board president will be the first to say that, at one time, we were not very accessible. A small but telling example was the lack of our address on our letterhead. However, be it grant-seeker orientations, meetings or workshops, now we are very much a part of this community."

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Brown also lives in the community in which her foundation is working. "For me, it's important to really be in the community. I live there, so it's as simple as taking public transportation and taking in what I see and hear or striking up a conversation with a taxi driver or talking with someone behind the counter at a fast food restaurant. Being in places where I am hearing disadvantaged people and what is of greatest concern to them."

Portillo says that his foundation's staff "is beginning to look like the make-up of the neighborhood," which is primarily Latino and African-American.

He also says that the foundation has become more aware of the differences between its way of working and the communities it is supporting. "When I was first hired, we had a policy that I must always wear a tie when I met with a grantee, but we have grown more flexible. These are barriers to inclusivity that you don't always think about."

A person at the Chicago meeting said something similar: "Our staff is not corporate and is less traditional. People come in and don't have an appointment and just sit down and talk about an idea."

Helmboldt says that when his committee interviews people requesting grants, they recognize that, "This experience can be intimidating. But once people get in the room, it is a pretty informal environment. The people on the committee are not white guys with suits. We really have a diverse group and are regular people doing regular jobs. We've done about as good a job as possible in having people who are just like you."

One of the big barriers between communities and foundations is language, a point many people made. As one person put it in Chicago: "Let's limit the 'foundation-speak.' It doesn't connect with our grantees. We need translation. Can residents help us write things that make sense in their own language?"

Another person said, "It's a different culture, using a different language. Don't diminish that."

Brown in particular does not diminish this. She says that she felt this gap even in Chicago. "It feels like community leaders and foundation people are not speaking the same language. They're not even on the same page. We are missing each other.

"Even though the foundation staff in the room generally have strong commitments to civic engagement at the community level, I think we were still missing each other. Is there a possibility of a shared language that is accessible to both?"

Brown believes this "common accessible language" is critical if foundation and community people are going to "reach some agreement about common purpose and vision."

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—Consuella Brown

She says that simply telling community people that they will lead the work isn't enough if the work isn't based on a joint effort to come up with this common vision.

Brown thinks the problem is a lack of candor in the relationships, another theme that came up a lot in Chicago and in the follow-up interviews. "We tell community people to be in the lead even when we are not sure they are on the right path. There is a fear of saying, 'We think you may be wrong,' because we want to support community leadership. But is holding back really helpful? Are we creating false expectations?"

One person said something similar in Chicago, calling for candor among both foundation people and community leaders. "We have to have honest conversations, but there is a level of candor that isn't taking place. It doesn't work to just sit back and let us do what we want. And it doesn't work if residents don't call foundations when they make mistakes."

Janus says something similar: "You have to have hard conversations when we tell people that something won't work."

How do you achieve this level of candor? Again, many people think it will only come

over time, as relationships develop a certain amount of trust. With that trust, said another person in Chicago, there can be more candor. "In my experience, most funders are not trying to avoid the truth. The challenge is being comfortable with being candid."

"The difficulty," explains Portillo, "is that there is always a funder relationship with anyone the foundation supports, so all of your ideas as a program officer are 'great.' A grantee is unlikely to challenge you."

He thinks the foundation needs to work at "making space for that sort of listening." This may mean "admitting our own faults first before we ask a grantee about what they need to work on. We have to be more candid about our foibles.

"It is difficult to approach a conversation if the group thinks you will be cutting them off once they become candid enough to mention their problems. That is a normal barrier between a funder and a grantee.

"As your relationships mature you can sometimes get around this barrier."

Brown believes that her foundation has overcome this barrier. "I think we are doing a good job when our partner organizations push back, and they do so a lot. I can't remember a site visit with a grantee who didn't do that." She thinks this shows that "the power balance is right" and indicates that "we let people have the freedom to disagree with our approach or analysis."

How did she get to this point? The key is that both the community and the foundation "come to this with a really honest spirit and a deep commitment to creating system change."

Roller believes the key is to "recognize that there is this disparity of power. We have to keep that real and admit it first and foremost and get that out of the way."

One of the Chicago participants thinks it's critical to establish a clear grantor/grantee relationship, with parameters up front. "What do you want from me and what do I want from you? Maybe it's that I want you to answer my calls in a timely way. Once you do that, you build something early on."

Another key is simply to recognize that, in the words of a person in Chicago, "the work is driven by people's passions." That passion produces energy. It can also produce anger. Listening to and accepting that anger can be an important step to building a more honest relationship.

But listening has another benefit, according to someone else in Chicago. "One of the most important things we do is pay attention. These groups are often doing work that is not easy and can be thankless. To have someone there to say that we believe in you and to put up some money behind that…groups are extremely appreciative of this moral support."

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