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4 Questions to sit with as you learn to let communities lead

4 QUESTIONS TO SIT WITH AS YOU LEARN TO LET COMMUNITIES LEAD

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Good things happen when funders shift power to communities. It's "regenerative." We "actually get outcomes that work" and "build a groundswell for change."

But it's hard to "give up power and build trust," to "learn about the things you got wrong," to "never have enough time to do it right."

During our recent session "Learning to Let Communities Lead" at Independent Sector's Upswell conference, we heard these and other things that make community leadership both exciting and challenging.

There's no single model for working with all communities, but in this session 3 speakers shared their models in hopes some elements could be adapted to fit other communities and contexts.

Jehan Benton-Clark (https://www.coloradohealth.org/people/jehan-benton-clark) shared how The Colorado Health Foundation uses the

Community Engagement IMPACT Practice Model (https://coloradohealth.org/sites/default/files/documents/2018-06/IMPACT_PracticeModel_March2018.pdf), a framework for how program officers engage with communities in Colorado.

Lysa Ratliff (https://upswell.org/speaker/lysa-ratliff/) talked about KaBOOM!'s process for partnering with communities (https://kaboom.org/resources/build_playground_toolkit/community_involvement) to plan, organize and build play spaces.

And Lauren Mikus explained the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation's model for funding multi-year, community-driven revitalization initiatives (https://grantcraft.org/content/case-studies/community-led-change/).

What was most striking was their and other session participants' commitment to pushing through challenges.

For them, it wasn't a choice. To sustain impact for the long term, communities have to own it, decide it, shape it and lead it. Philanthropy's current top-down approaches aren't working. If we want to see better results, communities must lead the change.

Coming out of that session, several questions are making us rethink the ways we work and how we support the foundations we work with.

4 Questions for funders to sit with as you learn to let communities lead:

1. What is the risk of *not* shifting power to communities?
Many funders think it's risky to give communities power to make decisions and lead change efforts.

After all, they could – and likely would – make decisions you wouldn't make. But, to borrow the language of Groundswell Fund Executive Director Vanessa Daniel in her recent *New York Times* article (https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/19/opinion/philanthropy-black-women.html): How are you managing the risk of *not* doing this?

If the solutions created outside of communities haven't led to the change you sought, then it's risky to keep funding those solutions.

It's risky to seek solutions from people who don't face the challenges or live with the consequences of their decisions.

2. What power are you willing to give up? As an organization, be brutally honest with yourselves about what level of power you're willing to share with the community.

As a team – and this is most important for the leaders and decision-makers in your organization – ask yourselves: If communities have this power, what decisions or actions might they take that I wouldn't agree with?

If you indicate that community members can decide how to spend a grant, and then you change your mind after you discover they want to spend the money on something you wouldn't prioritize, it would break trust and hurt your relationship with the community.

If you gather community members' input but don't seriously plan to do something with what you hear, community members may feel like their time was wasted and their voices weren't valued.

Once you've figured out what power you're willing to share, communicate clearly with the community about what they can expect of you and the process you plan to take.

It's also critical that you ask yourself: If we keep this power, what decisions or actions might we take that the community wouldn't agree with? Keep revisiting these questions and

pushing the boundaries of the power you're willing to give up.

3. How might you better understand the strengths of communities? The more you understand where a community shines brightest, the better partner you can be to that community.

This requires listening deeply and asking questions like: What makes you proud to live in this community? What have you accomplished by working together?

What strengths do you personally bring to the community? For our workshop, we put together this Google Drive folder (https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1_hdlajZtGc7TChWwV63fnvw64WwM9ZTx?usp=sharing) full of tools and resources on ways to center communities and shift power to them. (Session participants – and you, too – are invited to add tools and recommendations to the documents.)

The toolkit includes a section on understanding community assets (https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1rXyRn8GkhEcRhI_4_gq8GyRFlX1sG6_0). In addition to understanding those strengths, talk about them!

For example, if you can rattle off a list of challenges facing a community with a large population of undocumented immigrants, you should also be able to talk about the networks and social capital they've built to protect each other and connect each other with job opportunities.

See more resources on asset framing in the section on communicating changes (https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DGWTD8PLRyS05E_jX rt9a4HA711owhL44ArpDvcW8cg/edit).

4. How can we work together across our sector to reduce burdens on communities? As Lysa Ratliff of KaBOOM! pointed out to us, a community-centered approach also requires us to align better as a sector.

Our efforts can often unintentionally place burdens on the community. We ask them for their time, to report back to us on results and to manage us as a resource.

When our work intersects with the work of others in the sector, we have an opportunity *and responsibility* to better organize our efforts.

This can happen through informal sharing and networking or more formal mechanisms like roundtable discussions and data sharing.

When we move toward unifying our work as partners, rather than parallel entities, we will be able to improve our collective ability to support community interests.

In another panel conversation at Upswell, a funder said, "too often we are seen as experts because we have the money, but it needs to be the opposite: we are *not* the experts, because we have the money."

Changing the way we do philanthropy starts with this humility. It leads to more open power-, wealth- and resource-sharing with the real experts: communities themselves.

Walter Howell is a senior consultant and Lauri Valerio is communications manager at Community Wealth Partners. Walter and Lauri would like to acknowledge contributions to this blog post from Lysa Ratliff, Jehan Benton-Clark, Lauren Mikus and the session participants of "Learning to Let Communities Lead" at the 2019 Upswell conference. Follow @WeDreamForward (https://twitter.com/WeDreamForward) on Twitter.

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