

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

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Philanthropy & Funding

Power, Privilege, and Effectiveness: Are Funders Connecting the Dots?

To advance equity more effectively in collaboration with nonprofits and communities, grantmakers must share power with and leverage privilege for nonprofits and communities.

By [Kathleen P. Enright](#) | Oct. 1, 2018

Unexamined power and privilege can harm our ability to create social good and improve society. Those effects can be particularly acute in philanthropy, when individuals who have power and privilege use it to advance the needs or goals of one group over another. This can sometimes be inadvertent, as when a foundation invests its assets in companies whose products or practices harm the very communities it seeks to benefit. Conversely, grantmakers who consciously share power with and leverage privilege for nonprofits and communities are learning that a collaborative approach is pivotal to achieving social change and a more equitable society.

Within [Grantmakers for Effective Organizations](#) (GEO), a community of funders committed to using effective practices to address the issues that matter most to nonprofits, we are learning from grantmakers who are examining race and economic privilege so that they can better understand problems and advance more-effective social change. Often such explorations are a first step toward implementing power-sharing practices that center around the needs and strengths of the community, whose members come from a variety of racial and socio-economic backgrounds. These grantmakers are using two main approaches. In the first approach, grantmakers confront the legacy

of public systems and policies that better support white people to understand its harms; in the second, they give more power to the communities affected by its harms. Both have shown promise in tackling barriers to equity and justice.

Addressing privilege to advance social change



Power in Philanthropy

This series, presented in partnership with the [National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy](#), aims to explore popular concepts in philanthropy—such as risk, capacity building, and public leadership—through the lens of power and equitable outcomes.



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[Northern California Grantmakers](#) (NCG) brings together foundations, nonprofit organizations, government, and business to pool resources, share information, and co-learn in tackling the region’s most pressing social issues. With funding from [Blue Shield of California Foundation](#), which builds lasting and equitable solutions to end domestic violence and make California the healthiest state, NCG members are currently working to understand how philanthropy can help to reverse inequity in the state.

One issue related to power and privilege NCG has identified is the American myth of meritocracy, which **reinforces the belief** that those with wealth attained it based on merit, but fails to take into account how race, gender, social status, and pre-existing wealth influence access to opportunity. As one community advocate put it, “I’m tired of the story we tell that hard work leads to success, because that allows those of us who ‘make it’ to believe we deserve it and those who ‘don’t make it’ [to believe they] don’t deserve it.” In fact, psychology research has found that the meritocracy myth is harmful to many people, **including kids of color**. Exposing and dismantling this myth and acknowledging the role of privilege in inequity are essential steps toward closing the gap.

Another issue is that too few leaders in philanthropy are willing to confront privilege directly or use their unearned privilege to achieve racial equity. In explaining why well-meaning people often don't act courageously in service of equity, Brian Barnes, co-founder and CEO of the community-building nonprofit **TandemEd**, **observed earlier this year**, "Our commitment to enacting equity and justice is valid solely and only to the point that it does not tamper with the safety and security that we have for ourselves, our families, and our professional roles." In other words, when a commitment to equity threatens the benefits of our privilege, many people are unwilling to make the sacrifice. Yet only by facing privilege head-on can we truly leverage its power for good and ensure that it isn't operating in direct conflict with the social purpose that underlies philanthropic work.

So where can funders start? The **Colorado Trust** offers a good example. The trust's staff of community organizers recognizes the need to directly address power and privilege differences in their work as part of their commitment to achieving health equity. At community convenings, residents are learning how public systems better meet the needs of white people compared to people of color. This has helped change the conversation away from one of scarcity—the mindset that there are not enough public resources to meet the needs of all residents—to seeing that when systems serve people of color more equitably, everyone in society benefits. Gwyn Barley, vice president of community partnership and grants, acknowledges that recognizing their own power and privilege has enabled foundation staff to gain the awareness and skill to have these kinds of important conversations both internally and with residents. It has also helped them change how they make decisions and center the voices of people most impacted by health inequities.

By unpacking pervasive myths in American society (whether of meritocracy or scarcity), funders and communities can reframe the problems that drive inequity and identify more effective paths forward.

Implementing power-sharing practices

GEO has long advocated that grantmakers seek feedback from those they fund, and data from our triennial study of the philanthropic field **shows that a majority of grantmakers** now do. In 2010, GEO borrowed the mantra of the disability rights community for our guide to **engaging those closest to the issues** in devising solutions, "Do Nothing About Me Without Me", produced in partnership with **Interaction Institute for Social Change**. But this approach is not sufficient to shift power, and today, our partners and members are modeling more ambitious attempts to share or cede power.

Foundations that are consciously testing a more far-reaching approach to changing the power dynamic are finding that the very act of giving up their power to grant partners and communities is transforming their chances of reaching their goals. Here are two examples:

- *Power with:* From the start, the **Black Belt Community Foundation**, which promotes giving, makes grants, builds capacity, and fosters collaboration in its 12-county region, positioned Selma, Alabama, and its surrounding community as its “owner.” The only way to do that, says President Felecia Lucky, is to involve community members in everything. A set of grassroots volunteers called “community associates” keep the foundation tightly connected to the community. Participants receive leadership development training, and then serve as organizers and ambassadors in each county. They do site visits for grants, help with fundraising, and serve on board committees. According to Lucky, “Very few decisions are made without their input.” Community members are empowered, because they have a voice in determining the most effective path forward. The foundation meanwhile knows it is acting on what the community wants and acts with urgency, because the people it serves hold it accountable.
- *Power as service:* In its efforts to advance social, political, and economic equity, **The Whitman Institute** has put forward the idea of “trust-based philanthropy”—a grantmaking framework based on unrestricted funding for entities working to build power for people who don’t have it. Co-Director Pia Infante says one of the biggest benefits of providing flexible dollars is that “you are starting from a place of implicit trust rather than distrust. We see ourselves as walking shoulder-to-shoulder on the journey toward the work we’re trying to achieve together.” The institute carefully considers how much it asks of potential grant partners, and grant reporting happens through conversation rather than in writing. When the foundation asked grant partners for feedback to help guide its final years of operation, the overwhelming response was: Ask your peers in philanthropy to adopt your trust-based approach.

A number of our partners and members, including **Justice Funders**, **Grantcraft**, **Edge Funders**, and the **National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy** are also deeply engaged in exploring how grantmakers can do more to share power with nonprofits and communities, and directly address privilege in service of equity and effectiveness. Meanwhile, GEO is developing a publication, workshop, and conference around community-driven philanthropy.

Power and privilege are inherent to philanthropy; our history and resources make it unavoidable. Rather than trying to eradicate power and privilege from philanthropy, or wielding them clumsily under the mistaken belief that we somehow have the answers, we need to

find more ways to share power with communities and give power to coalitions of nonprofits. Only then can we change systems and improve lives in ways that last for generations.



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