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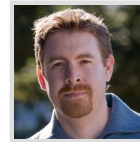


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ABOUT SEAN STANNARD-STOCKTON



Sean Stannard-Stockton is CEO of Tactical Philanthropy Advisors, a philanthropy advisory firm that serves individual and family philanthropists. Sean is the author of the Tactical Philanthropy blog and writes a monthly column for the Chronicle of Philanthropy. He is a member of the World Economic Forum's Council on Philanthropy & Social Investing and has been quoted or referenced in The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Financial Times and many other media outlets.

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Foundations as Catalysts for Collaboration

July 15, 2011 – 7:44 am

This is a guest post by Jacob Harold, who leads grantmaking for the Philanthropy Program at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

By **Jacob Harold**



These days, if a nonprofit manager says that their organization can solve a social problem alone, they're likely to get quizzical—if not dirty—looks. After years of isolated activity, most nonprofit leaders have come to understand that the great challenges of our time are too big and too complicated for any single organization to solve. The broader philanthropic community seems to have internalized the fact that collaboration is often a prerequisite to impact.

But it is one thing to say that cross-organizational alignment is important; actually organizing such activity is another challenge altogether. And that challenge is multiplied when—as is so often true—**the key players are not all nonprofits, but also include government or corporate organizations.**

Given the constrained budgets and overburdened schedules of today's leaders (regardless of sector) we cannot rely on them to magically align their efforts. Much to their credit, organizational leaders sometimes leap the difficult structural barriers and self-organize. But it often takes an outsider or a new party to help a whole be greater than the sum of its parts.

I believe that foundation program staff are sometimes well-positioned to play this facilitative role. Let's be clear: they are well-positioned not a result of any particular skill or intelligence but only because of the unique character of the foundation perch. A program officer at a major foundation can come to understand the contours of a field simply by returning their phone calls and emails (not that we always live up to that obligation). Even a passive PO can quickly learn who is doing what, at what scale, and why. No other player has such privileged access to information. But what should we do with that privilege?

Some funders have tried to make good use of it. The Packard Foundation worked closely with consultant FSG to help **their marine fisheries grantees align their strategies**. Liquidnet for Good's **Markets for Good** work has been essential in articulating a shared vision within the community of online giving platforms (I—and many others—have been involved in that work, as well). Many funder affinity groups support efforts to align strategies among nonprofits in a given issue area.

So foundation staff can sometimes take up a share of the financial, logistical and intellectual burdens of collaboration. But there are at least two major barriers to useful funder participation.

First, just because you have a bird's eye view of a field to see the key dynamics doesn't mean you know what to do next. In fact, no one may immediately know how to improve the functioning of the system as a whole. It may take research, discussion, and deliberation to determine a strategy—activities which themselves require collaboration.

Second, nonprofits are made up of human beings who generally don't like being told what to do by an unelected or unappointed party. Collaboration requires a sense of shared ownership; if people believe there's a puppet master, they will not bring the same spirit of collaboration, purpose, and engagement that is needed. They might fake it for a while, but it won't last.

So foundation staff find themselves in a profoundly tricky position. They are often better-positioned than anyone to help align disparate efforts. But they can only succeed with authentic buy-in from participants, first to come up with the solution and then to execute it. That buy-in is difficult to build given the inherent power dynamics of foundation funding. This is not only a strategic challenge, it is an emotional one.

At the risk of being trite, there's a simple way to get over these barriers. Like any facilitator, foundation staff need to be honest, humble, and focused on shared purpose: honest about the challenges facing a field, humble about their role, and constantly reinforcing the group's common goals. (It doesn't hurt if they—where appropriate—provide general operating support!)

Grantmaking is often presented as a fundamentally analytical enterprise. It can be. But in our increasingly complicated world, it just may be interpersonal skills that are most important to help us capitalize on our lucky bird's-eye views.

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Phil Buchanan says:

July 15, 2011 at 8:52 am

Great post, Jacob. Three quick points prompted by your thoughts.

The first is that nonprofits recognize that foundations are uniquely positioned to see across “disparate efforts” — and they value it when foundations play that role well. We see that clearly in our analysis at CEP of tens of thousands of surveys of foundation grantees.

The second is that I think many of the best examples of philanthropic impact in the 100 years since the creation of the American mega-foundation – from the Green Revolution to work on tobacco use –involve the kind of recognition that a single actor can't go it alone that you discuss. I think smart, strategic folks working in philanthropy have long understood this! Of course, that doesn't make it easy to do well, and your counsel here is spot on, in my view.

The third is that we need to be careful that in our talk of “collaboration” with business and government we not lose sight of the fact that sometimes it is influence of business and government we're after, but it isn't “collaboration,” exactly, that will get us there. I wrote about this issue in the wake of the BP oil spill last year on the CEP blog.

<http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/blog/2010/06/bp-oil-spill-a-cautionary-tale-on-blurring-of-sector-boundaries/>

Phil Buchanan

The Center for Effective Philanthropy

Reply

Kristin Majeska says:

July 15, 2011 at 11:23 am

Great post Jacob! Your caveats are as important as the high potential opportunity for foundations to encourage collaboration. Encouraging collaboration must be done thoughtfully, with humility (and as you say, ideally with some \$ to support it).... or else the effort will backfire. We've all seen it happen and I know many of us in the funding community have learned that lesson the hard way a few times.

Reply

Jacob Harold says:

July 15, 2011 at 11:32 am

Phil

Thanks for the kind words and the good thoughts here. Agreed on your first two points. To build on your third point, one thought. Personally, I'd argue that the "blending" of the sectors need not mean we have to meekly accept each others' flaws—but it does mean we need substantive engagement.

For example, Rainforest Action Network (<http://ran.org/>) is a very aggressive environmental group that campaigns against the destructive practices of some companies—but it does so with a nuanced understanding of the markets and supply chains of those firms. RAN staff and activists may rappel off the roof of a company's headquarters with a 50-foot banner to force negotiations. But once the company's ready to come to the table, they're also ready to put on a suit, pull out the spreadsheets, and have productive conversations. What's more, RAN is willing to celebrate a company's good actions and support good people within companies. At their best, this complexly collaborative a process can not just reduce harm, but create new good.

RAN staff move between confrontation and collaboration according to what best achieves their goals. They don't necessarily celebrate the market, but they do acknowledge its power. (We could come up with lots of related examples involving government, too.)

So, in this broader sense, you're probably right, the word "collaboration" is sometimes too soft. But I'd say "influence" is too narrow. Maybe "engagement" is a better word to capture the range of cross-sector strategies we need.

Generally, I believe that a social change strategy should reflect the nature of the social problem. If the problem involves business, government, and nonprofits (as most big problems do) then the solution needs to involve all three, as well.

Thanks,
Jacob

PS: Full disclosure, I used to work at Rainforest Action Network

Reply

Phil Buchanan says:

July 15, 2011 at 11:45 am

Great example and I agree. I also think sometimes it works well when one organization plays the confronting role and another the put-on-the-suit-and-sit-at-the-table-role. Not all will be as adept as RAN apparently is at playing both.

Reply

Paul Shoemaker says:

July 15, 2011 at 12:00 pm

I'd suggest that the soil in which these kinds of collaborations can grow is that which is tilled by funders that have already been working on the ground, on the street for years. That means directly with non-profits (and the public sector), working on tough day to day challenges together. Out of that comes strong relationships, common understanding, and collaborations can then take root and grow in a real strong, sustainable way. Versus we all just come to the table and meet for the first time and say "let's collaborate." I agree with your perspective, Jacob, and the strategy you lay out; I'm just adding another layer to what it takes to truly do these collaborations successfully for the long-term

Reply

Autumn Walden says:

July 15, 2011 at 2:06 pm

Collaboration or synergy between nonprofit & government entities always enters into

discussion around here. There is a great article in today's NY Times about social entrepreneurship, advocacy, and government and how they are all necessary for change: "Real Change Requires Politics" by Anand Giridharadas: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/16/us/16iht-currents16.html>.

Reply

Sophia Guevara says:

July 17, 2011 at 5:19 pm

An excellent post, Jacob. With many grantees perceiving foundations as only valuable for grant money and with many foundations doing little to change that perception – it would be nice to see a foundation that bucks the trend. If there were several well-publicized examples of foundation/grantee collaboration that worked out successfully, I am sure other foundations would follow suit.

Reply

Evan Mendelson says:

July 18, 2011 at 12:59 pm

I want to add to the comment by Paul Shoemaker. It's not about the funder calling everyone to the table and declaring "let's collaborate." A sustainable collaboration (which is needed to address complex issues) requires that the experts on the ground take ownership of the outcomes and build the collaboration to include the broadest range of organizations to address the issue. It means paying attention to how the collaborators interact and who is missing at the table. FSG supports a "backbone" organization, or support system, focused on the collaboration process to insure that the shared ownership and systems change focus are maintained and strengthened.

Reply

Jacob Harold says:

July 18, 2011 at 1:09 pm

Kristin: Thanks and agreed.

Paul: Yes, and you, I know, speak from experience! SVP has been a leader in developing those deep, human relationships with grantees and other partners.

Autumn: Very interesting article, which I hadn't yet seen but have since recommended to several people. (Though I'd argue many social entrepreneurs are quite thoughtful about political context.)

Sophia: Interesting point, and I think you're right. It's a reminder of the importance of the work of the Communications Network (<http://comnetwork.org/>) to, as they say, "strengthen the voice of philanthropy."

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