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Review of Staying the Course

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Review of *Staying the Course*

Moody, William S. (2014) *Staying the Course: Reflections on 40 Years of Grantmaking at the Rockefeller Brothers Fund*. London: Alliance Publishing Trust. ISBN: 1907376216

As a researcher who works with local nonprofits, and with the majority of my experience working with foundations, I was eager to hear William “Bill” S. Moody speak at our university about his role as a funder with the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF) for forty years. What I did not expect, however, was that the talk would motivate me to read the book. I was moved by the talk as the content was much deeper than the history of the foundation. He talked about relationships in grantmaking, evaluation of grantmaking, and how to responsibly change course to meet the needs of society.

The overarching theme of the book is that grantmaking decisions – who to fund, which geography to focus on, with which funders to partner, and even who to hire – all need to be made based on strong relationships, built over time, both between the program officer and the grantee and between the grantee and the community which they serve. With the age of technology bringing fewer in-person interactions and more emphasis on quantitative evaluation measures, I was left wondering whether this grantmaking style is something program officers can continue to do. Can strong relationships still give innovative grants an opportunity to see the light of day and drive decision-making for the path of future grantmaking?

While the book is organized by a timeline of Moody’s grantmaking at RBF, that timeline also is associated with a geographic area of focus, as well as grantmaking themes. The themes spiral throughout the book and were adapted for place and time. These themes stood the test of time through foundation shifts and political changes for Moody while working at RBF.

The book begins with a description of how Moody fell into the program officer role with RBF, and how proximity to the RBF family influenced his perspective on grantmaking for the foundation. This first chapter of the book is a useful case study for those starting out in program officer work, as Moody describes the difficulty of being a new program officer, learning about the interest areas of the foundation, while still reading, investigating, and recommending grant proposals to the foundation. It also highlights the need for the program staff to have a strong connection and deep understanding of the strategy for the foundation.

The rest of Part One focuses on leveraging relationships to enhance the value of grantmaking, taking calculated risks, and exiting grantmaking areas. Relationships are clearly a key piece to the grantmaking puzzle; the type of relationships described by Moody take a great deal of time to build. Can this type of grantmaking occur with short, one-year grants? Can it happen when there is a constant need to see the “needle move”? To have trustworthy relationships between funders and grantees, those grantees must be able to share successes and failures, alike, and learn from them. Our current state of grantmaking may not allow for this prolonged relationship-building style.

The second part of the book begins with reflections on a yearlong sabbatical and the implications for his work with the foundation. It was a time for him to refocus, to find his drive, and to do what he did best, build relationships, this time in Central and East Europe (CEE). That time enabled him to develop a grantmaking strategy for this region. As the board and staff of RBF decided to focus on CEE, the grantmaking during this time period

(1980 to 2000) was impacted greatly by the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Given the tumultuous times, Moody makes a strong case for foundations to support the infrastructure of not only organizations, but also of regions with minimal Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). He gives several examples of times he thought there was insufficient progress, only to learn later that the work done planted a seed that blossomed at a later point. This phenomenon raises the question of how a foundation can know the impact of their work, given many of these larger changes cannot be measured until significant time passes. Does the current focus on measurable impacts influence the duration of funding, perhaps ending it before there is a chance to see results?

The second and third sections of the book provide an important and unique perspective on civil society. Moody describes the role RBF took to support the birth and development of NGOs and foundations where there once were none or had not been for many years. For many outside of philanthropy and nonprofits, it may be unclear what roles nonprofits (NGOs) play in our societies. However, this section highlights what we would miss without the third sector. Moody shares the importance of supporting these organizations through not only funding, but technical assistance, board involvement, and connections with others doing similar work.

In Section Three, Moody also describes RBF's role in working with governmental entities. While there were challenges – from actual funding needs to corruption – Moody recognizes and endorses trying to partner with governments when possible to lead to sustainable changes within that society. He gives a very candid view of the work done in the Western Balkans during ethnic battles. The frank explanation of the work, struggles, and learning would be beneficial to other funders targeting regions with similar circumstances around the globe.

Moody makes a push for the importance of supporting organizations, especially ones the foun-

dation is not currently funding, through board involvement. This is a thoughtful piece of advice for those working as program staff to continue to use non-monetary leverage points to support organizational growth and sustainability. It is also a reminder to foundations to support this endeavor.

The last section of the book shares Moody's "Principles and Practices," which summarizes his style of grantmaking. While this section includes most of the tenants mentioned throughout the book, one key precondition that is not explicitly stated in the list of principles and practices is that grantmaking must take place over a significant period of time. All other principles and practices he discusses are contingent on the length and consistency of the grantmaking.

While it is clear Moody had a successful career at RBF through relationship-building and heavy engagement in geographic areas, I am left wondering if program staff can practice this style of grantmaking in the current world of philanthropy. Although the purpose of the book is to give Moody's perspective on grantmaking throughout the last forty years, I expected to see his style shift throughout time. Rather, his style of grantmaking is flexible, because it is based on relationships within contexts. I also expected to see shifts occur around evaluation. However, there was little discussion around formal research and evaluation in guiding decision-making. Moody used anecdotal stories to show success. It is unclear to me whether this is a sustainable way to measure success in many foundations. Many organizations are so focused on seeing the needle move in three to five year grant cycles, perhaps they are missing more expansive and long-term impact by focusing on immediate outcomes.

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