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Carolyn Chernoff
Moore College of Art and Design

V Varun Chaudhry
Northwestern University

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A Visionary Organization: From Donor Intent to New Horizons of Race and Gender Equity

Carolyn Chernoff, Ph.D., Moore College of Art and Design, and V Varun Chaudhry, M.A.,
Northwestern University

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Introduction

The Leeway Foundation is a unique American philanthropic organization focused on funding women and trans artists working for social justice in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and the surrounding five counties. The organization began as a family foundation some 25 years ago, when the founder and donor used her sizable inheritance to establish a fund to support women artists in the Philadelphia area. What is particularly notable about Leeway is the way the foundation has changed and transitioned along with — and in some cases, ahead of — mainstream understandings of gender and racial equity.

While it is a tautology to say that mission-driven organizations are shaped by the founder's perception of the mission, it's also a fact. Founder and donor intent, along with founder's syndrome, often shape organizations in ways that can impede or limit positive change and growth, raising the following set of questions: How do mission-driven organizations adapt to changing social and political circumstances? How does the founder's original vision shape the organization in years to come, particularly after the founder exits decision-making capacity? We address these questions in this article using the Leeway Foundation as a case study.

After addressing the concepts of diversity and inclusion, particularly as they pertain to the field of philanthropy, we establish a framework for how organizations grow and change past the founding phase, considering questions of donor intent. This is particularly relevant in the case of Leeway, because the founder and donor are

Key Points

- This article documents the unique trajectory of the Leeway Foundation and its transition from sole-director family foundation to an independent foundation. Over 25 years, Leeway shifted in structure and grantmaking, yet has remained in line with its founder's original mission: to fund women artists in the Philadelphia region.
- This article focuses on the shift from the founder's initial intentions to what is now an organization informed by models of racial and gender equity, funding women, trans, and gender nonconforming artists working for social change. Leeway thus serves as a case study for examining transformational shifts in mission, vision, and constituency with leadership after an initial donation.
- Through analysis of qualitative data, this article addresses donor intent and (unintentional) legacy in changing social and political circumstances. We consider how the organization's development was enabled but not constrained by the circumstances of its founding and identify strategies and best practices for other foundations in transition, whether in terms of population served or organizational structure.

the same person, Linda Lee Alter. By walking away from her substantial inheritance and decision-making power regarding these funds, Alter allowed Leeway to grow and change in new and previously unforeseen directions beyond her original vision, which was to fund woman-identified artists in Philadelphia. After establishing

our use of terms like “diversity” and “inclusion,” we document these changes based on archival documents and in-depth interviews. Finally, we present our findings on what other foundations and philanthropic organizations can learn from this unique case study, particularly with regard to gender and racial equity in changing times.

Diversity and Inclusion: Messy Processes

To understand the Leeway story in the context of donor intent and founder vision, we address the concepts of diversity and inclusion. As contemporary foundations rightly focus on diversity and inclusion among board members, staff, and populations served, there is a very real danger of tokenism and other trivial changes that do not serve the larger goal of funding social change, which in the United States inheres around race, class, and gender, as well as ability and sexuality. Much research argues that inclusion is a more useful goal than diversity, although including those outside mainstream power structures (read: white and class privileged) can too easily replicate the status quo with some key demographic differences. Fredette, Bradshaw, and Krause (2016) address the importance of inclusion over diversity in their recent work on board composition. As they argue, individual experiences in organizations are not simply a matter of functional inclusion, but part of a larger project of social and relational inclusion. Tokenism has long been seen as a danger of functional inclusion without addressing larger social and relational dynamics; as Kanter (1977) argued decades ago, the use of token representation hinders growth and change by suggesting that institutional change can happen solely on an individual basis. That is to say, individuals can easily be discounted, seen to either speak for an entire group, or be marginalized. As Fredette et al. argue, “people simply do not experience diversity in a one-dimensional fashion, whether from the functionalist perspective of a stakeholder or the relational one of a group member” (p. 47).

So, then, the continued challenges of diversity are practices more than principles, although clearly frameworks matter. Fredette et al.

We argue inclusion is a bumpy, ongoing, and often iterative and recursive practice. It is also necessary.

(2016) argue that a framework of inclusion is much more useful to boards of directors than one of “diversity,” because of the tension, not to mention short-sightedness, of attending to optics rather than social patterns and contexts. Inclusion and organizational transformation are rife with tension and contradiction. Perhaps these cannot be avoided and must be embraced or at least consciously acknowledged and managed as best possible. The question of inclusive feminisms and what they might look like in practice is an ongoing one, with a history fraught with the challenges of difference (Freeman, 1972–1973, Young, 1986, Joseph, 2002). Young, Freeman, and Joseph all argue in different ways for the importance of dissent, of what we call “messiness,” and against utopian visions of harmony and cohesion.

We argue inclusion is a bumpy, ongoing, and often iterative and recursive practice. It is also necessary. In analyzing the Leeway story, or the story of a visionary organization that moved from an original charge to fund women artists in the Philadelphia region to one focused on racial and gender justice through socially conscious artmaking, we see the importance of intersectional identity and the messiness of making progressive change.

Past, Present, Future: A Three-Phase Overview of the Leeway Foundation

This article addresses Leeway’s 25-year history in three main phases: foundations, a move towards racial justice, and trans affirmation. By “racial justice” and “trans affirmation,” we mean a conscious attempt to address racial and gender-based inequality in society at large and within the organization, particularly for people who identify as trans, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, and

other identities outside of cis man/cis woman.¹ Explicit focus on race and contemporary understanding of gender beyond a binary medically assigned at birth was not a conscious or intentional trajectory for the foundation, at least at the beginning. Leeway has evolved in ways that are in keeping with Alter's original vision for the organization. Leeway is a unique case study, but one that has much to teach other organizations by example: how to radically restructure a non-profit organization so it remains vital past the founding phase; how to explicitly center gender and racial justice and develop trans-affirming policies and practices; and how to evolve as a philanthropic organization ahead of mainstream notions of art, gender equity, and racial equity, thereby advancing a more radical understanding of philanthropic practice.

Throughout the three phases of the foundation, the founder's original vision and intent remain consistent, although the original mandate to fund women artists in the Philadelphia region looks very different in 2018 than it did in the early 1990s. From the intent to fund women artists to the current mission to fund "women and trans artists working for social change," the foundation itself has grown in size, scope, staff, and grantees in ways that Alter could not have imagined. Leeway is currently a leader in trans-affirming philanthropy that addresses gender and racial equity. In other words, Leeway currently works according to principles of intersectionality, a black feminist framework initially established for service organizations to build programming that recognizes how different forms of power and identity intersect and/or work in tandem (Crenshaw, 1991). Programs and grantees, quite literally, look different than early Leeway grantees, who were almost exclusively cis white women working in visual art. Alter now emphasizes that her original vision

of "women" was always trans-affirming, but at the time of establishment, second-wave feminist models that she drew upon were, with the exception of early black feminist voices, rarely explicitly concerned with gender or racial diversity in their conceptions of "womanhood" (Lorde, 1984). So on one hand, Leeway remains true to the original donor's intent: a foundation that addresses gender inequality in funding Philadelphia-area artists. On the other hand, Leeway is one of the few organizations to successfully transition from funding women to embracing a trans-affirming and nuanced understanding of gender oppression. In what follows, we employ a three-phase model of the Leeway Foundation to describe how this transition happened and what other organizations can learn from this shift, which is also a conceptual move from second-wave feminism to race-critical² and intersectional feminism.

In using this three-phase model to describe the history and transitions of the foundation, we not only address what changes happened, but also how. How did this transition happen, particularly as it was ahead of mainstream awareness of the centrality of trans issues for social justice funding? Through a process of building relationships with artist communities, leadership learned more about race, which led to new learning about gender. Organizational change followed openness to new ways of understanding the world. This change was driven by cis people looking to be allies and change makers, to be certain, but it also emerged in the midst of other organizational conflicts over power.

In the next sections, we address the foundation's origin story and 25-year history in more depth to document the interconnectedness of race, class, gender, and sexuality for philanthropic organizations concerned with social change. We

¹ "Cis" as used here is short for "cisgender," which denotes gender identity and presentation that align with biological sex (i.e., not transgender or gender nonconforming). Someone who identifies as "trans" has a gender identity (or identities) that differs from the gender medically assigned at birth (generally "male" or "female," based on external genitalia). A cis woman, then, would be someone assigned female at birth who continues to identify as a girl or woman.

² We use the phrase "race critical" to recognize how Leeway's feminist approaches were, at this point, critical of the predominantly white second-wave feminist approaches, but not yet fully cognizant of the "intersectional" approaches (that is, approaches that see race/gender/class as co-constitutive). "Race-critical feminism," then, refers to a step in the longer process of working toward racial and gender equity, broadly speaking, in the organization.

argue that organizations can retain their original charge even as what that looks like, philosophically and programmatically, changes along with the larger social context and in response to community needs. This change process, however, is often necessarily messy, and demands a particular kind of visionary leadership and organization to move forward rather than implode. Major organizational changes, furthermore, often trigger other unseen changes, particularly in the case of demographic shifts and attention to social justice, where intersectional approaches to feminism remind us that race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability, among other relevant categories, are co-constitutive in critical ways that cannot be ignored. In our findings, we return to arguments about vision, change, messiness, and the urgency of recognizing intersectionality in philanthropy, as well as the need for visionary leadership.

Phase 1: Foundations

We begin the story of the Leeway Foundation with Phase 1: Foundations, which focuses on the work of founder Linda Lee Alter, an artist and philanthropist in the Philadelphia area. This phase might best be understood as a charismatic, do-it-yourself organization focused on finding its way in the world of philanthropy, funding mostly middle-class white cisgender women artists, mostly painters. (See Table 1.) During this phase, Alter and her collaborators — who she continues to emphasize as vital to organizational processes at every phase — laid the foundation for a uniquely mission-driven organization to grow and change while remaining true to its call to fund artists historically excluded from funding. The organizing principle of this phase, then, came largely from Alter’s second-wave feminist politics, committed to centering the experiences of women. While Alter maintains that her vision of women artists always referred to “anyone who identified as a woman,” there were limited conversations happening publicly in art and philanthropy circles about possibilities for gender diversity. In retrospect, we find the original charge of the foundation to have intersectional intentions, although at the time, class-privileged white cis women like Alter were rarely conscious of notions of racial and gender equity beyond binary terms.

We argue that organizations can retain their original charge even as what that looks like, philosophically and programmatically, changes along with the larger social context and in response to community needs.

According to Alter’s personal website and interviews with her and her daughter (who later became president of the Leeway’s board of directors), Alter came from a middle-class Jewish family in Philadelphia who raised her to think actively about giving as well as about mobilizing her resources and privileges for social good. As an artist herself, Alter quickly noticed inequities in the art world, specifically along gendered lines. After first establishing herself as a collector of women’s art, she decided to use her family inheritance in the early 1990s to establish the Leeway Foundation, which would provide funds to women artists. In an interview, Alter recalled, “One morning in 1990, while eating my breakfast oatmeal, light dawned!” She had been involved in local nonprofit arts groups and had served as a board member for other arts-based organizations, but these actions “did not feel like enough.” She said, “I thought, ‘I am an artist. I know, firsthand, that women artists don’t have equal opportunities to male artists. I’ll create a foundation to recognize, encourage, and help support local women’s artists!’” From this initial vision, Alter established Leeway.

Of note in this first phase for the foundation are two key components. The first is Alter’s understanding of “women.” Alter was clear at the time, and continues to be clear today, that she was most knowledgeable about her own “first-hand” experience, which was thus prioritized in the foundation’s earliest years. Put another way, though her vision was in theory inclusive

TABLE 1 The Three Phases of the Leeway Foundation, 1993–Present

Phase	Approximate Years	Leadership Structure	Key Change Agent	Overarching Mission	Philosophical Model
Foundations	1993–1999	Founder Linda Lee Alter, with informal support of friends and family	Founder	Support, encourage, fund women artists in Philadelphia	Second-wave feminism
Racial Justice	1999–2005	Sara Becker Milly, Denise Brown (move towards formal structure with executive director, board of directors, and staff)	Staff, consultants, executive director	Fund women artists at the intersection of art and social change	Social justice, race-critical feminism
Trans Affirmation	2005–present	Denise Brown (executive director); board of directors; expanded staff, including program director, communications director, administrative assistant, various staff, and interns	Executive director, staff, grantees	Support women, trans-identified artists, cultural producers who work at the nexus of art and social change	Trans inclusion, trans affirmation, intersectional feminism

of anyone who identified as a “woman,” the foundation catered primarily to Alter’s personal connections and communities. The vision of the organization thus was consistent with what can now be described as second-wave feminism, i.e., attending to “women” as a category describing to a singularly oppressed group (e.g. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* or Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*). This vision of “woman,” as scholars have noted (hooks, 1984; Crenshaw, 1991), often did not encapsulate the realities for women also marginalized by sexuality, race, and class. Alter’s vision, expansive in theory but narrow in practice, is closely connected to the second notable component of the foundation’s first phase: Alter’s continued attribution of organizational work to community members. Alter lists numerous community members, friends, and peers in the art and philanthropy

worlds who helped her in the organization’s initial phases, including founders, directors, and staff at other organizations; a close lawyer friend who helped to incorporate the foundation; and, perhaps most importantly, Alter’s daughter, Sara Becker Milly. Through multiple conversations about gender, class, race, and power, organizational leadership went on to challenge the assumptions inherent (though perhaps not intended) in such an approach.

Phase 2: Racial Justice

Phase 2: Racial Justice, marks Leeway’s transition towards a more formal organizational structure, particularly through such structural changes as moving oversight and decision-making responsibilities to Milly and a board of directors, and expanding the organizational structure

to include a staff of two. As Alter entrusted her daughter with board leadership and the two continued to bolster existing connections and make new ones with local artists, activists, and community philanthropists, the initial vision and intent for the foundation started to undergo important shifts. These structural changes went along with more intentional funding goals, including supporting emerging artists and those doing less conventional forms of artwork, a new decision-making model for grants, and new awards. During this stage of transition, consultants and staff also pushed the organization to center social justice in its grantmaking and internal policies. These processes and a redefined organizational mission led to a philanthropy with over \$20 million in assets that distributes approximately \$350,000 in direct grants to artists each year, with an explicit focus on funding women and trans artists working for social justice within a larger framework of racial and gender equity.

In a recent interview, Milly described how, while she initially understood the foundation as “this thing” her mom was doing, she started to connect with Philadelphia organizations like Spiral Q Puppet Theater and Bread & Roses Community Fund. Both organizations had and have an explicit focus on social justice, and working with leaders of these organizations helped Milly to shift her ways of thinking about the possibilities for art, philanthropy, and, ultimately, social change. Through strategic planning and conversations across different organizations, Milly said, she understood how, at the heart of both her and her mother’s interests, “injustice around gender and the desire for inclusion really mattered to my mother and me.” With this acknowledgment as a scaffold, board president Milly, along with some of the family’s good friends, newly hired Leeway staff, and select local advocates and artists embarked upon an organizational transition that involved messiness, change, and difficulty.

The result of these organizational transition processes was a newly developed organizational mission: at this point, in the early 2000s, Leeway would now fund women-identified

artists who worked at the intersection of art and social change. The shift away from simply funding “women artists” as a category and toward requiring artists to present larger visions for social change came from the arduous process of reflection and training, led and influenced by community advocates including numerous women of color and LGBTQ-identified people. Most remarkably, it was in this transition that Alter and Milly made the decision to walk away from overseeing their family endowment, leaving the control of the money in the hands of organizational staff, who Alter and her daughter imagined might be able to speak more directly to and about the communities they hoped to benefit and serve.

Reflecting on the rare decision to walk away from a \$20 million endowment, Milly said, “conceptually, it wasn’t hard.” She contextualized the ways this decision made sense to her by describing how becoming board president was “an extremely unusual situation to begin with.” She recalled,

I didn’t really have leadership skills, and I didn’t make the money, so I didn’t have money-making skills at all, so I was just this person from a family with money who found themselves president of the foundation. That was weird — and fortunate in a way, because I never wanted to hold onto any power. I always felt I was the wrong person to have it.

By this point in the leadership transition process, Milly had been part of the community funding board at the Bread & Roses Community Fund, a community-based foundation supporting grassroots organizing in the Philadelphia area. Through this experience, Milly met Denise Brown, who then was associate director for Bread & Roses and now serves as executive director for the Leeway Foundation. Milly says now, “If I hadn’t been connected to Bread & Roses ..., I wouldn’t even have known how to remotely think about, let alone how to articulate, that work.” The power of serendipity, or accidental change, is crucial to the Leeway story. Organizational leadership has been uniquely able to take stock of new ideas and concepts and

[T]his willingness to experiment, change, and grow are crucial lessons for other foundations.

apply them to the foundation; this willingness to experiment, change, and grow are crucial lessons for other foundations.

Milly was committed, even if mostly theoretically, to the notion of community transformation, and, feeling the pressures of leadership unfairly thrust upon her, she wanted to pass the endowment — and with it, decision-making power — on to those she could trust to remain committed to the work at the intersection of art, social change, and community transformation. While the decision to give up the control of the endowment was not difficult for Milly and her mother and family friends, the trainings, unlearning biases and prejudices, and conversations that came along with these processes were quite challenging. In reflecting upon the process, Denise Brown, who served as an advisor to the transition at the time, recalled:

I kept saying, you know, you gotta be really clear if you want to do this; this is really going to shift this organization in a lot of different ways, and if you're not really serious about it, you shouldn't engage it! Because at that point the conversation was really about marginalized communities, and given that the mission was explicitly about women at that point, it was more about the inclusion of people of color or people who claim certain ethnic identities.

Anti-racism trainings, conversations with community organizations, and challenges from the newly hired staff, who were committed to expanding Leeway's scope through lenses of racial and gender justice, often landed uncomfortably for white, class-privileged people like Milly and her family. If Brown hadn't been there to counsel her through difficult conversations and challenges to her leadership and privilege, she says, "everything might have completely fallen apart." Thus, while the story of leadership

shift for Leeway appears at surface level to be an often-romanticized account of (in Milly's words) a "straight, rich, white lady" giving up power, the reality was much messier and more challenging.

Milly reflected on some of the difficulties in the process of organizational transition and transformation:

It was really just a question of, like, how do you make the transition to having the people who Leeway is designed to benefit be the same people who lead? And then, you know, even if you do have that clear intention, there's the question of "are you guys really sincere?" And then beyond that, there was still a lot buried history: Even if you're completely sincere, there's the foundational beliefs and structures of power that the foundation grew out of, so even if it's moving there's still this history.

Milly, Brown, and many of the other key players in the process — including former staff members who pushed for organizational change — were keenly aware of the power dynamics underlying these organizational shifts. Regardless of intention, or how "sincere" she and her mother were, Milly knew that she had to make decisions in the face of a great deal of "buried history." As Brown often describes in relationship to her leadership role for Leeway, "somebody had to get out of a chair in order for me to be in it." In this case, the organization went through a complete transformation of leadership, from the organization's founding family to a seasoned nonprofit leader. This shift brought with it the creation of dedicated staff positions and more reliance on consultants and a growing board of directors. Messy as it might have been, the transition was necessary for Leeway to begin to make a range of important changes and shifts in internal politics and practices that impacted funding, programs, and ongoing relationships.

Phase 3: Trans Affirmation

Soon after, and at times coinciding with, the Phase 2 changes, staff began to push the board on questions of what it meant for the organization to be concerned with discrimination on the basis of "gender." These questions guide the current Phase 3: Trans Affirmation, which addresses

Leeway's internal and external processes for rethinking and redefining "gender," as well as supporting trans and gender nonconforming artists and their work. These conversations began soon after the organization shifted to fund artists who work at the intersection of art and social change. Former staff member Kavita Rajanna described how, while working as program director for the foundation during Phase 2 transitions, she found it unfair that her nonbinary and gender nonconforming friends were unable to apply for Leeway grants, since the foundation had an explicitly feminist and gender justice-focused vision that did not use trans-inclusive or affirming language. Brown added that the decision to include trans and gender-nonconforming applicants as part of the organizational mission was a move that made sense following the previous organizational transition. With the assistance of a board of directors made up primarily of community members (as opposed to family members and friends, which was previously the case), the foundation made the decision to expand its grantmaking beyond the category "woman" to include transgender and gender-nonconforming applicants.

The first out trans-identified applicants were encouraged to apply for grants in 2006, just a few years following the previous transitions for the organization. Also in 2006, Leeway staff spearheaded an externally facilitated set of trans inclusion trainings for board and staff members; 2006 was also the first year that Leeway fiscally sponsored the Philadelphia Trans Health Conference, the largest trans-focused conference in the world. This sponsorship marked the beginning of an ongoing relationship among the conference, local trans advocates, and Leeway, in keeping with the organization's value of establishing long-term relationships with various constituent communities.

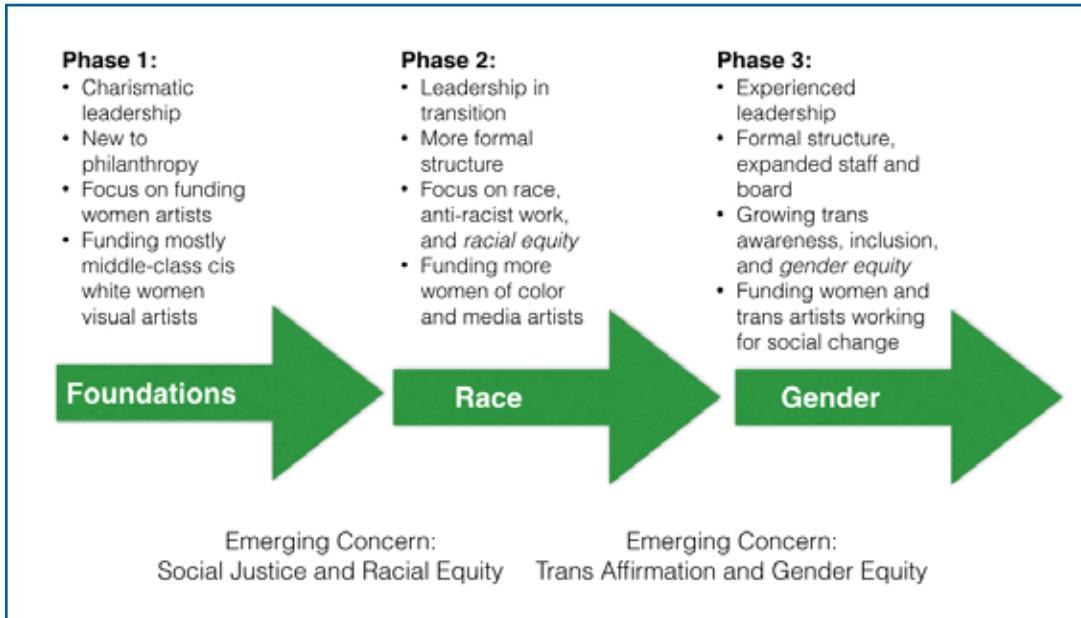
Once staff made the decision to expand the organization's constituency, the question of intentionality yet again came to the fore. Brown describes how, after having expanded grantmaking and consequently changing applications and personnel policies to be more trans inclusive, she began to gauge what this question looked like

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internally. "So, now you have an organization that's made this decision and this commitment to this constituency, that hasn't really trained or educated itself to engage that [community]," Brown reflected. She and other cis-identified staff have continued to ask the question, in many ways mirroring Milly's question about leadership and community engagement: "How do we not marginalize folks? It had to be more than, 'we're saying that this constituency can apply for a grant,' but 'how do we create the same organization for everyone?'" Brown said. Committing to expanding the organizational mission and focus in this way, then, required the intentional engagement of staff, board, grantees, and applicants, to shifting their mindset to a broader understanding of "gender."

Making Space: Formal Processes Around Inclusion and Access

In the process of becoming more trans-inclusive and -affirming, Leeway Foundation staff and board underwent further trainings as well as targeted outreach to bring in more trans and gender-nonconforming staff, board members, and applicants. Leeway brought the first openly out, trans-identified panelist to serve on the panel for one of the annual small-project grants, the Art and Change Grant, in 2007. Following this, the organization hired its first trans-identified staff member in 2008, and, in 2009, Gabriel Foster (former Leeway staff member and now co-founder and executive director of the Trans Justice Funding Project) conducted community focus groups and produced a Trans Inclusion Report that helped the organization to bolster its trans-focused outreach, training, and programming. Brown described this phase of organizational transition as a cultural shift: "From

FIGURE 1 Conceptual Processes Driving Organizational Change

the very beginning I think part of the culture, once this change had occurred, was really about having the responsibility to find the people who wouldn't normally think of themselves as having access to a resource like this." Access, part of Alter's original vision for the foundation, remained a key organizing principle and institutional value, even as the people to whom access was extended changed in terms of self-definition and organization.

Access to resources and refigurative politics (creating the structures and relationships within Leeway's ongoing work that the organization hoped to see extend to the larger world) also remained a constant value and organizing principle in this third transition. Paying LGBTQ community leaders, such as Foster, Chris Bartlett (longtime activist and director of the William Way LGBTQ Community Center in Philadelphia), and David Acosta (Latino and gay-identified activist who founded local Philadelphia LGBTQ organization GALAEI) to help with organizational outreach to trans and gender-nonconforming communities was one way that Leeway staff responded to their "responsibility" to this new, key "constituency."

As with the anti-racist trainings and shift toward a mission focused on community transformation, staff and board engaged in difficult conversations and received some pushback from community members; all the while, the organization has since remained committed to its vision of trans inclusion and affirmation. As Brown put it, someone has to get out of the chair for someone else to get in it. In order to include a full range of women and trans artists working for social justice, as the current mission stipulates, Leeway must employ, consult with, and reach out to a full range of women and trans community leaders across race, class, and other axes of identity. (See Figure 1).

Today, more than 10 years after the organization expanded to include trans and gender-nonconforming applicants, communities throughout the city of Philadelphia and beyond look to the Leeway Foundation for guidance: whether it is organizations looking to undergo transitions to becoming more trans-inclusive and -affirming, or trans-identified artists looking for support and resources in their work. At the same time, however, organizational staff refuse to remain complacent with this progress. In a forthcoming

guide the organization is publishing for peer organizations (foundations and cultural, feminist, and LGBTQ organizations) on steps toward trans-affirmation, Leeway asserts, “We recognize that this guide and associated opinions, suggestions, and comments come from our own (often imperfect) experiences.” Particularly as an organization that does not claim to be a trans-focused organization, this imperfection is often the starting place for ongoing discussions about gender justice and diversity. Additionally, in a number of interviews, current staff and board members emphasized the need for increased trans and gender-nonconforming representation. Current Program Director Sara Zia Ebrahimi describes the staffing issue as “one area where we fall short,” and all of the staff members mentioned the need to continue to include trans and gender-nonconforming voices in all levels of decision making.

While the process of trans inclusion and affirmation at the Leeway Foundation can no longer be considered part of its “future” vision, given the organization’s ongoing work around training and education as well as documenting the process, as an example this process demonstrates just one manifestation of the work of Alter and Milly’s intentions as donors. When asked about her desired future for the organization, Milly replied that she could never have imagined the kinds of decisions, leadership, and work that the foundation does now. “I’m just thrilled to think about the people who are here now, asking those questions,” she said. “Fifteen years ago, I just had the foggiest vision [of these communities].”

Currently, she said, there is a general “intention to continue to cultivate inclusiveness and justice and art — you know, art in the sense of broadly defined expressions of creativity and humanity.” This intention is constantly “evolving and deepening and expanding, not in the sense of getting focused, but as it is lived and as people who are currently holding that charge.” The work of donor intent (and, by extension, legacy) here is represented in this notion of change as a constant for the Leeway Foundation. Milly described that while she may not have been able to imagine where the organization has gotten today,

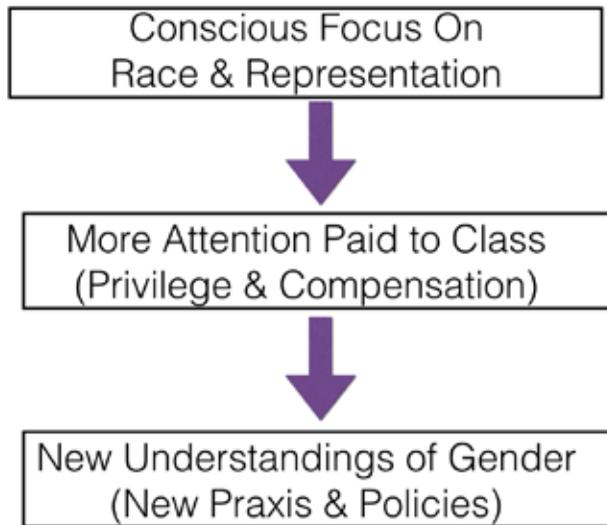
The work of donor intent (and, by extension, legacy) here is represented in this notion of change as a constant for the Leeway Foundation.

she feels secure and content in her decision to walk away from the foundation’s endowment. “I had a feeling that something was possible,” she reflected. “But I had no idea how to do it, and I knew we were not the people to do it — so it was like, ‘Let’s just aim ourselves in this direction, and see what happens.’” Such an aim has quite clearly continued to have powerful ripple effects on women, trans, and gender-nonconforming artists and advocates in Philadelphia.

Findings: Messiness and Vision

The Leeway story is one of organizational transition. This particular case study hinges on a process of change that recognizes the interconnectedness of gender and racial equity, rather than a focus on equality or equal representation. This distinction is an important one. A popular cartoon image frequently circulated via social media and organizational trainings illustrates the difference between “equality” and “equity” by showing three people of different heights trying to see over a fence. At first, only the tallest one can see. The equality model gives everyone a wooden box to stand on, which helps the tallest and next-tallest see, although the shortest person still cannot see. The equity model gives each person what they need to see, foregrounding the notion that justice does not necessarily mean everyone getting the same thing, but rather, each person, each community, receiving what they specifically need in order to participate in a just society.

Following that notion, of creating gender and racial equity, we define gender and racial equity as a part of gender and racial justice. That includes “work to address root causes of inequities not just their manifestation. This includes

FIGURE 2 Emerging Concerns Driving Organizational Change: From Race to Gender

elimination of policies, practices, attitudes and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race or fail to eliminate them” (MP Associates and Center for Assessment and Policy Development, 2013). In other words, gender and racial justice might be defined as “the proactive reinforcement of policies, practices, attitudes and actions that produce equitable power, access, opportunities, treatment, impacts and outcomes for all” (Applied Research Center and Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, 2009). In shifting its own understanding of gender inequality quite substantially from the original vision of (presumably white, cis) women as an oppressed class, Leeway is the rare case of a women’s organization successfully making the change to one focused on gender justice, trans affirmation, and gender equity. While Alter maintains she always understood “women” to include trans women and perhaps those on the transfeminine spectrum, nonbinary and queer notions of gender were not part of discussions of gender in mainstream philanthropy at the time Leeway was established. While Alter’s original vision is perhaps unchanged in Leeway’s current iteration, certainly explicitly addressing racial and gender equity was necessary in order to see the organizational mission as consistent. In addressing

Leeway’s history and the larger question of the role of founder and donor intent, we argue inclusion is a bumpy, ongoing, and often iterative and recursive practice. It is also necessary.

In this story, peer foundations and leaders move throughout the three phases of Leeway. As Milly noted, radical grassroots peer organizations like Bread & Roses and Spiral Q helped illustrate the possibility of visionary organizations along with the notion of organizational transition. Outside consultants and facilitators, including Executive Director Denise Brown, were also critical in helping this small organization grow from a staff of one to its current structure. For Leeway, hard conversations, open conflict, and other challenging processes led to new understanding about racial equity, which also brought awareness of the need to explicitly work for gender equity. The changes from what might be deemed second-wave feminism, funding mostly white, cis women artists, to today’s trans-affirming/ intersectional feminism model, funding women and trans artists working for social justice, could not have happened without serious interventions and organizational resources as well as a willingness to change and grow. (See Figure 2.)

Milly said, “15 years ago, I just had the foggiest vision” of what Leeway could become. Now there’s a new vision and a way to see. Leeway grew and developed in keeping with the founder’s original vision, although the trans-affirming notion of gender equity and focus on art for social justice certainly may look different from the original Leeway grantees: presumably cis women, mostly white, visual artists. Alter does hold that her notion of “women” always included trans women, although at the time of establishing the foundation, these terms and concepts were extremely marginal in mainstream philanthropy.

What is most unusual here may be the founder and family’s willingness to step aside and let the organization grow and change, and trust that original values would continue to guide organization, albeit in very different forms. The question, then, is how to create a culture where staff and board are trusted and trust one another to work through differences, not to silence them. In the Leeway story, we see that trust is built not only through the founder and original donor’s initial culture and vision, but through mess and struggle and a willingness to let the organization itself transition. Leeway employed an unintentional ripple model, and used the realities of change and struggle within the organization and broader social change movements to guide the focus and process of its own growth and development.

Currently, other organizations look to Leeway as a model of trans-affirming philanthropy, intersectional feminist praxis, or racial and gender equity. Lessons learned from the Leeway case study, like lessons learned directly from current staff, focus on the ways that organizations can remain true to donor intent and founding vision while growing, changing, and pushing boundaries for the benefit of constituents and the larger culture. In Leeway’s case, some of the most productive changes around gender equity and trans affirmation came out of an initial focus on racial equity. While none of the board or staff at the time identified as trans, nonbinary, genderqueer, agender, or other identities outside of what we now call cis, staff members engaged in racial justice movements were able to see and advocate for those marginalized and excluded by traditional

The question, then, is how to create a culture where staff and board are trusted and trust one another to work through differences, not to silence them.

power structures, including philanthropy. Through powerful (and often painful) discussions and group processes among board and staff at the time, the foundation as a whole was able to clarify Alter’s original vision: to fund those marginalized or excluded because of their gender. This new vision, which found form in the charge to fund women and trans artists working for social change, certainly marked a shift from the grants and programs of Phase 1 — yet also remained consistent in vision, if not embodiment.

For organizations looking to shift internal culture and external grantmaking, programs, and community connections to a model of intersectional feminism, racial and gender equity, and an overall focus on funding social justice, the pitfalls of what Young (1986) called “the ideals of community” must be overcome.. That is to say, a focus on unity can stifle not only dissent, but disallow inclusion beyond tokenism. We argue that messiness, a willingness to consider overlapping conversations happening outside philanthropy, and an ability to keep the founder’s vision at the front of radical restructuring are all ways that can help organizations grow and change.

Lessons Learned

What can other organizations learn from the Leeway case presented here? First, that organizational identity is also intersectional. When one aspect of an organization’s identity, brand, or focus changes, other aspects are also likely to change. Conscious change in one arena may lead to unintended or unexpected changes in other arenas. While interpersonal conflict and coincidence within an organization may well foment change, as was the case for Leeway, there are

Conscious change in one arena may lead to unintended or unexpected changes in other arenas.

also distinct phases of organizational transition. In the case of Leeway, the phases move from the early foundations of a feminist organization to:

- Explicit focus on social justice, which changed the grant focus from women artists to artists working for social change. This shift led to:
- Explicit focus on race, anti-racist practices, and racial equity; hiring and funding people of color. This shift led to:
- Explicit focus on gender exclusion, oppression, and equity; hiring and funding trans and gender nonconforming people.

At the same time that conceptual changes impacted the organization's mission and policies, the role of board and staff connections to new communities cannot be overlooked. If an organization chooses a radically new focus to programs or communities served, leadership must also nurture relationships and expand to include new voices or philanthropy turns to missionary work. One the more challenging aspects of affirming new people and communities within an organization is in the area of policies, specifically pay and benefits. Are people from marginalized communities asked to provide free labor, or to share ideas without acknowledgement or other compensation? What kinds of financial and other needs might people helping to shift organizational focus have, and are these needs that a human resources department can directly address? Money matters. Leadership matters. Organizational change brings with it a need to create new pipelines for leadership.

Radical restructuring, and even moderate growth and change, cannot happen without

trust. Board and staff must be able to trust one another, even when they disagree. This is where consultants and new voices can be most helpful — not to impose a new agenda, but to help staff and board distill the vision of the organization while finding new ways to accomplish that vision more inclusively. There is no one path, but a willingness to not only consider but include those outside the organization can make for messy, scary, painful, and often powerful growth and change.

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Carolyn Chernoff, Ph.D., is a member of the graduate faculty at Moore College of Art and Design and a member of the Leeway Foundation's board of directors. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Carolyn Chernoff, Moore College of Art and Design (email: cchernoffphd@gmail.com).

V Varun Chaudhry, M.A., is a doctoral candidate in anthropology at Northwestern University, a pre-doctoral fellow at the Center for the Study of Women in Society at the University of Oregon, and a former scholar in residence at the Leeway Foundation.