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Anna J. Bettis
Arizona State University

Susan Pepin
Arizona State University

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Strengthening Support for Grantees: Four Lessons for Foundations

Anna J. Bettis, MSUS, PMP, and Susan Pepin, MD, MPH, Arizona State University

Keywords: *Responsive, philanthropy, community resilience, trust*

Introduction

The nonprofit sector delivers services that contribute to the economic stability and mobility of communities across the United States (Camper, 2016). Yet nonprofits are increasingly vulnerable: 8% are technically insolvent, one third have had deficits for three or more years, and half have cash reserves to meet less than one month of expenses (Hrywna, 2018).

It is not surprising that more than half of nonprofit leaders say they are unable to meet the sharply increasing community demands for services (Independent Sector, 2016). As society becomes more interconnected, the problems nonprofits are tasked with addressing require systems work. It is imperative for funders to adapt not only to the challenges faced by the organizations they fund, but also to the dynamic social systems within which they aim to effect change. This requires new approaches that are responsive to community needs and address the known challenges in grantor-grantee relationships.

Reflective Practice

In an effort to identify those new approaches, in August 2017 we conducted a study that involved hour-long interviews with 33 board members, executives, management, and front-line staff at nonprofit organizations with similar missions that serve vulnerable populations in the same locale, and with subsequently chosen funders that had relationships with those nonprofits. The interviewees were selected from among those who had experience addressing financial instability within their organization and were either (1) recipients of grant funds or (2) funders. (See Table 1.)

The questions developed for the interviews were based on a review of literature on grantor-grantee relationships, grantmaking best practices, and common financial challenges experienced by nonprofit agencies. Interviews were recorded with participants' consent, and later transcribed. We conducted a qualitative analysis using NVivo coding software and

Key Points

- As society becomes more interconnected, the problems nonprofits are tasked with addressing require systems work. It is imperative for funders to adapt not only to the challenges faced by the organizations they fund, but also to the dynamic social systems within which they aim to effect change. This requires new approaches that are responsive to community needs and address the known challenges in grantor-grantee relationships.
- This article offers a new perspective on the role of private foundations and four key lessons for strengthening funder support. These learnings build upon existing research and were gleaned from a qualitative analysis of data from interviews with 33 board members, executives, management, and front-line staff at nonprofit organizations with similar missions that serve vulnerable populations in the same locale, and with subsequently chosen funders that had relationships with those nonprofits.
- The interconnected challenges facing our communities are demanding more from philanthropy. Funders that build partnerships, recognize and respond to grantee reimbursement models, ease reporting burdens, and leverage their power to convene will make significant contributions to improving the resiliency of those communities.

TABLE 1 Study Interviewees

Type	No. of Interviewees
Funders	7
Nonprofit staff/leadership	18
Nonprofit board members	8
Total	**33**

identified recurring themes, from which four overall lessons emerged.

Research supports the idea that a key to building resilience is "gaining greater knowledge and awareness of risks ... as well as gaining lessons learned" (Schipper & Langston, 2015, p. 13). This article presents these four lessons to inform funder support for organizations and help foster community resilience, which we define as the "ability of people, communities, and systems to rebound from shocks and stressors" (Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust & Institute for Sustainable Communities, 2018, p. 3):

1. Building a trusted partnership with grantees better positions funders to address risks and increases the chance of grants achieving intended outcomes.
2. Responding to challenges faced by grantees dependent on government reimbursements improves their ability to deliver grant outcomes.
3. Easing grantee reporting burdens reduces unnecessary strain on nonprofit capacity.
4. Convening community partners around a cause benefits both grantors and grantees.

Lesson No. 1: Build a Trusted Partnership With Grantees

Recognizing the inherent challenges in grantor-grantee relationships, we propose an approach that goes beyond traditional risk-identification mechanisms like annual reports or financial reviews. We argue that when funders can intentionally work to build relationships, publicly demonstrate their willingness to meet grantees where they are, and use their expertise to help address or prevent challenges, their investments in nonprofit partners have a better chance of achieving intended outcomes.

According to the National Center for Responsive Philanthropy, "power dynamics are the most significant source of tension" in foundation relationships with grantees (Choi, 2017, para. 1). And because of this inherent power imbalance, it is human nature for nonprofits to give a positive report to funders. As one nonprofit leader stated,

> It's a human tendency and survival tendency to paint the prettiest picture you can [when talking to funders]. … I don't know how you break that, other than developing relationships at the level where you can really understand what's going on and have a good line of communication.

As Maya Winkelstein (2018) notes, many grantees "fear that communicating honestly will have negative consequences for their organization" (para. 12). Our interviewees shared this sentiment. When speaking to funders, many said, they felt they always "had to say everything was fine." As one remarked, "When funders asked me [about challenges], I did not feel that I could be honest and I hated it." How would a foundation know of a threat on the horizon to a grantee's viability, and thus to the work in which it has invested? Audited financial statements are often outdated by the time funders see them. Many

While the field recognizes the importance of building trust with grantees, our findings highlight that investing more time in building relationships is not enough: Funders need to be there when trouble arises. The real world is messy; it is impossible at the start of a multiyear grant to perfectly predict the future.

nonprofit failures are rooted in governance, culture, or leadership issues, none of which would be found in the data on a balance sheet. Nationally, "only 52 percent of nonprofit leaders believe their foundation funders are aware of the various challenges their organizations face" (Buteau, Block, & Chaffin, 2013, p. 6). If every one of its grantees are reporting that progress is being made entirely as planned, a foundation should take that as a sign that it has more work to do to create a safe space for dialogue. It is not enough to ask about challenges; intentional work is necessary to build an atmosphere where grantees feel comfortable sharing them. Without permission and the sense of trust needed to disclose problems, nonprofits may "improvise in the face of disappointing results without benefitting from the advice or assistance that funders could offer" (Fairfield & Wing, 2008, p. 29). When a grantmaker opens a necessary yet difficult conversation, a developing financial challenge can be brought forward before it becomes a crisis. By enabling open and honest dialogue with grantees, funders are better positioned to identify risks to their investments.

Strengthening relationships with grantees means investing time and energy in communication. Studies show that foundations that initiate contact more than once a year with grantees, rather than waiting for grantees to reach out, have stronger relationships (Buteau, Buchanan, & Chu, 2010). To work toward a trusted partnership, practitioners in the field should consider how often they have conversations with grantees. Do funders wait for grantees to call? Do they ask grantees how often they would like to communicate? The dynamics of grantor-grantee relationships are inherently challenging; knowledge of and attention to best practices can help mitigate the power imbalance.

While the field recognizes the importance of building trust with grantees, our findings highlight that investing more time in building relationships is not enough: Funders need to be there when trouble arises. The real world is messy; it is impossible at the start of a multiyear grant to perfectly predict the future. If nonprofits are honest, as one interviewee stated, funders "can't use that against them. That's where it's going to have to be the leap of faith from the nonprofit, and the foundation is going to have to say, 'OK, thank you for telling us. How do we help with this?'"

In a trusted partnership, funders open the door for grantees to disclose challenges. Beyond continued funding, consider how grantees can benefit from sharing institutional knowledge or augmenting grants. For example, could a programmatic grant request be strengthened by adding funding for better financial management software, evaluation support, development staff, or technical assistance to help address the grantee organization's most pressing threats?

It takes a strong organization to deliver effective programming. A threat to one unit can have a ripple effect throughout an organization. Even if a funder supports only one program at a nonprofit, it is prudent to respond to any risks that could undermine the viability of the organization delivering that program.

Another way to signal that a funder would like to be a trusted partner is to regularly share what it has learned that grantees could benefit from knowing. Funders are usually in a position to see

the larger landscape of efforts in a community, and are likely are aware of multiple agencies working in a similar space. But only around a third of nonprofits believe that their foundation funders share "knowledge they have about what other nonprofits are doing to address similar challenges" (Buteau et al., 2013, p. 6). It is the funder's responsibility to change that. With so many nonprofits financially vulnerable — more than a third are fearful they will lose a major source of funding — this is true now more than ever (BDO USA and Nonprofit Times, 2017). As one interviewee stated, "There's so much uncertainty out there. I'm really fearful that something like 25% of nonprofits are going to go under because the government will just say, 'You know what? Figure it out.'" Nonprofit leaders report that they are often so focused on delivering services that they do not see big challenges coming. With foundations in a unique position to understand the challenges facing nonprofits, it is incumbent upon them to share what they have learned with their partners — thereby better equipping them to succeed.

Education on how to navigate sector-specific vulnerabilities is an ongoing need for nonprofit staff and boards, and is another critical area where funders are uniquely positioned to respond. Nonprofits often draw their staff from other sectors, and institutional knowledge can be difficult to retain given the high turnover rates that can occur in these organizations (Bur, 2017). Specifically, interviewees pointed to the need for a better understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the finance committee of a nonprofit board, and said that funders can better support grantees by informally sharing best practices for nonprofit finance when they see opportunities to do so.

The finance committee is responsible for oversight and management of the nonprofit's financial risks. According to H. Polanco, founder and CEO of FMA, a consulting firm specializing in strengthening foundation capacity and nonprofit financial management, a nonprofit's finance committee at minimum should have quarterly meetings where financial variances are discussed (personal communication, February 23, 2018). Yet many board members do not have prior experience with nonprofits and therefore are not aware of this. While it is the responsibility of the nonprofit's staff to ensure that funds flow in accordance with contract stipulations, without regular review of financial statements by the board an important safeguard for the organization's viability is missing. Funders can strengthen nonprofits by ensuring that their boards have the tools and knowledge needed to perform their oversight duties.

A foundation with a history in a community has important institutional and contextual knowledge that can greatly benefit grantees. Funders should consider how to lend to grantees this knowledge and, more broadly, consider how the questions they ask could increase grantee awareness of essential best practices.

Sharing financial expertise is another way funders can support grantees. Nonprofits can have difficulty attracting and retaining finance talent; philanthropic organizations can support the sector with their institutional talent. Further, lending foundation staff expertise to uncover problems that grantees have not yet seen can contribute to strong grantor-grantee relationships (Buteau et al., 2010).

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In some cases, adding a financial consultant or reporting-system upgrade to a grant can strengthen a grantee's ability to deliver important services. Practitioners are passionate about solving problems in the community and will take advantage of funding opportunities to expand programs that address those problems — sometimes at the expense of their internal capacity.

Lesson No. 2: Address the Unique Vulnerabilities of Nonprofit Grantees

One recurring theme in our interviews was the particular difficulties in managing organizations that receive a majority of their revenues from government contracts and reimbursements. Given that one third of funding to the nonprofit sector comes from government sources, funders should be aware of what unique vulnerabilities this type of funding creates (Never & De Leon, 2014). With the help of Fiscal Management Associates, we identified the five significant challenges to nonprofits whose funding depends substantially on government contracts:

1. Most government contracts are cost reimbursements — nonprofits must spend money before getting the money. This requires that nonprofits have cash and/or a credit line.

2. Reimbursement arrives only after the required paperwork has been submitted on time. This demands that nonprofits are adequately staffed and trained.

3. There is a significant administrative burden that comes with reporting for reimbursements. This requires sophisticated systems and staff with specialized, up-to-date skills.

4. Government contracts can have unfunded mandates and usually do not cover the full costs to deliver on those mandates. As a result, delivering on a contract may cost a nonprofit more than its reimbursement.

5. Each new government contract adds pressure on a nonprofit to raise funds that will cover the gap between the cost to deliver services and what the government is willing to pay for it. A good rule of thumb: For every dollar it receives in government funds, a nonprofit needs to raise 10 cents elsewhere.

These vulnerabilities can have immediate implications for nonprofits. Reimbursements can be slow to arrive, which often leads to cash-flow problems (Campbell, 2016). This was another recurring theme; as one interviewee stated, "every nonprofit has its issues in terms of … the whole business model of providing services and then being reimbursed later." Nonprofits with a significant amount of federal funding are 226% more likely to draw on reserves, 159% more likely to reduce the number of staff they employ, and 230% more likely to freeze salaries (Never & De Leon, 2014). The complex reporting requirements from government funders add another layer of difficulty to the already strained financial capacities of nonprofits — one respondent described them as "crippling."

Given these challenges, be inquisitive about how funding can be best leveraged to help advance the work of grantees with a significant portion of their revenue from government sources. In some cases, adding a financial consultant or reporting-system upgrade to a grant can strengthen a grantee's ability to deliver important services. Practitioners are passionate about solving problems in the community and will take advantage

of funding opportunities to expand programs that address those problems — sometimes at the expense of their internal capacity. Listen to grantees that receive government funding to learn about how you can be most helpful, rather than holding them to a predetermined funding protocol. Treating these nonprofits as you would an organization with more diversified and flexible revenue does them a disservice.

Lesson No. 3: Reduce Administrative Burdens on Grantees

Grantors are in a position of power relative to prospective grantees. Organizations that do not meet funding guidelines will not receive support. Organizations that rely on contributed revenue are impacted by the decisions made by funding agencies. Relative to public funding, which is often inflexible and requires sophisticated administrative systems, private foundations are bound by far fewer restrictions (Ohio Literacy Resource Center, n.d.). In a world that can change rapidly, the nonprofit sector is often on the front lines in responding to pressing community needs and must be resilient to do so effectively; private philanthropy is better positioned to offer nonprofits the necessary support.

Changes to reporting requirements are one way funders might reduce the burden on grantee capacity. Nonprofits are asked to comply with different reporting requirements for each funder (Kotloff & Burd, 2012). Does this need to be true for private funders — especially those in the same community? As one interviewee observed, "[we are all] dealing with the same private [foundations] here in town." Many interviewees told us that meeting the reporting demands of multiple funders was a capacity challenge for their organization.

While a simplified approach to reporting might take more effort on the part of funders, they have a shared interest in strengthening the nonprofits they invest in. Furthermore, as one interviewee noted, "If you're asking the nonprofits to collaborate, doesn't it make sense to also ask the foundations to collaborate?" Foundations have the ability to reduce the reporting burden by working together to deploy a single reporting mechanism. Philanthropy increasingly recognizes the importance of building nonprofit capacity; reducing unnecessary administrative burdens would go a long way in that direction.

Foundations have an underutilized ability to convene stakeholders around a cause. Convenings are an opportunity for grantors to learn about local needs and for grantees to identify risks and strategic opportunities to work together.

Lesson No. 4: Convene Community Partners Around a Cause

Foundations have an underutilized ability to convene stakeholders around a cause. Convenings are an opportunity for grantors to learn about local needs and for grantees to identify risks and strategic opportunities to work together.

Foundations are uniquely situated to encourage the connections among nonprofits that contribute to organizational and community resilience. Funders typically have links to many agencies and thus have a landscape view of the work in the community. Staff at foundations are in a position to research effective practices in the field and scan the horizon for threats to the sector. For community organizations, an invitation from a funder can serve as a motivator to get the right people to the table. Foundations can offer financial resources, provide experienced facilitators, and foster the connections between organizations upon which to build trust. Furthermore, foundations are often seen as neutral actors — an important factor for successful collaboration.

Convenings can also provide an opportunity for broader input from grantees about community needs. When exploring potential funding

opportunities, grantors often ask about an organization's mission and the mechanics for sustaining its work. When nonprofits with similar missions are convened around a cause, however, we found that the conversation among their leaders tended to focus more on impacts. Interviewers indicated that by actively listening in these settings, funders can learn about sector and community needs and the local context more holistically than by following traditional grantmaking approaches. Convenings are an avenue for funders to lean on grantees' expertise in "on the ground" issues. The goal of philanthropy is not to simply produce thriving nonprofits, but also to achieve effective outcomes. Given the pace of change and the interconnected nature of the problems the nonprofit sector aims to address, neither funders nor grantees can afford to operate in a vacuum.

The number of nonprofit organizations is steadily rising (Pettijohn, 2013). In discussing this proliferation of nonprofits and resulting inefficiencies, interviewees frequently pointed to a seldom-discussed factor: individual ego. The realization that a new or merged organization will not need two executive directors can lead many nonprofits away from joining forces (Lewis, 2016). One interviewee from a nonprofit argued that "[when people] really care about their impact in the community, they don't have to be the CEO of their own nonprofit. They can … connect to another, stronger nonprofit that has the same mission." Convening nonprofits with similar missions is one way to foster this outlook. In a field where decisions should be made to advance public good, it is incumbent upon nonprofits to prioritize the mission and for funders to help facilitate the conditions where this can take place.

Leading a nonprofit effectively is no small task, and interviewees indicated that limited resources require staff tend to wear many hats. The future of funding for social service agencies is uncertain, but faced with the day-to-day responsibilities of operating a nonprofit, time for scanning the external environment for potential risks is scarce. Collaboration can help nonprofits be more resilient by providing a vehicle for learning about those risks. Strategic collaborations can help organizations tap complementary skills, support best practices, expand their reach, improve efficiencies, and reduce costs (Stengel, 2013). Connections among agencies also create more resilient communities by expanding options for responding to threats and strengthening social cohesion. Isolation from others doing similar work means leaders have one fewer source of alerts to external shifts that may threaten their business model.

While staying connected to the ecosystem of providers is important for any nonprofit, some may benefit from teaming up with another provider. Bringing together organizations with similar missions can provide opportunities for nonprofits to envision new ways of collaborating. Mergers between nonprofits are often explored in response to financial distress or major challenges (Foster, Cortez, & Milway, 2009); coming together in this way can help challenged agencies avoid a lapse in services to vulnerable clients. But nonprofit leaders should not wait until a crisis to explore the benefits of merging with others doing similar work.

Consider, for example, Arizona's Children Association (AzCA), which reduced cost per beneficiary by 40% while increasing the number of clients served by 100% by merging with and acquiring a number of organizations that complemented AzCA's strategic goals related to geography, service and brand (Foster, Cortez, & Milway, 2009). As the association and other organizations have demonstrated, services for the community can be expanded by considering how smaller nonprofits can become programs of larger ones. Funders should intentionally reward organizations for collaboration efforts and create spaces where they can develop: "Get some of these folks to look around the room and see if they couldn't merge," one nonprofit leader advised.

Fostering collaboration among stakeholders in the community requires a degree of humility on the part of the funder; it means listening and allowing others to lead. The process of ensuring that the right people are at the table also creates

space for new voices. Bringing stakeholders together helps to build a stronger, more resilient community capable of adapting and overcoming challenges.

Conclusion

This article presents a new perspective on the role of private foundations in the field that is based on qualitative insights from nonprofit leaders and funders. By analyzing those insights and building upon the existing literature, four key lessons emerged.

First, funders should build a trusted partnership with grantees whereby they lend institutional knowledge, intentionally foster open dialogue, and demonstrate their commitment to helping address challenges. Second, grantmakers should be aware that grantees may receive government contracts requiring them to spend first and be reimbursed later; even if it means parting with "what you've always done," be responsive to these grantees rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach. Third, by working together, funders have the ability to reduce unnecessary administrative burdens on grantees. Fourth, the interconnected challenges facing our communities demand more from philanthropy; use convenings to not only foster collaboration, but to garner insights about approaches to addressing the social challenges that nonprofits are collectively working to address.

Funders who build partnerships, recognize and respond to grantee reimbursement models, ease reporting burdens, and leverage their power to convene will significantly contribute to the resiliency of their communities.

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Anna J. Bettis, MSUS, PMP, *is senior program coordinator for executive and professional education in the School of Sustainability at Arizona State University, and was the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust's inaugural resident scholar. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Anna J. Bettis, School of Sustainability, Mail Code: 5502, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85281, (email: abettis@asu.edu).*

Susan Pepin, MD, MPH, *is the former president and CEO of the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust and is currently managing director of health and clinical partnerships, senior advisor to the executive vice president, and clinical professor in the College of Health Solutions at Arizona State University.*