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# Donor-Led Community Engagement: A New Model for In-Kind and Philanthropic Giving?

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**Keywords:** *Corporate foundation, in-kind donation, capital improvement*

## Introduction

Nonprofits and foundations always seek ways to increase impact through creative use of resources — not only direct funding, but connections and relationships as well. In Las Vegas, Nevada, the Wynn Resorts Foundation accomplished this by employing a strategic approach to corporate-led donor engagement that departs from traditional models of corporate philanthropy to involve both the community and internal stakeholders in unique ways that build buy-in among donor networks and long-term capacity for nonprofits. Guided by its Transformative Impact Model (TIM), the foundation lent its own expertise and leveraged its professional networks to coordinate in-kind capacity-building donations that revitalized the Veterans Village Crisis Intervention Center and The Shade Tree, a shelter for women in crisis and their children.

This article reviews some traditional approaches to corporate-led donor community engagement before it examines the planning, coordination, and completion of the two Las Vegas projects. It goes on to outline four key elements of the TIM, and discusses the strengths and challenges affecting the model's applicability to other funders and communities. Insights into the TIM were gathered from interviews with stakeholders: employees of the Wynn Resorts Foundation and Wynn Resorts Management; Veterans Village and The Shade Tree staff; and tradespeople and contractors involved in planning and construction. We also reviewed media and public relations accounts of the two projects, as well as other publicly available information.

## Key Points

- While philanthropic relationships between nonprofits and businesses are complex and ever evolving, the dominant pattern is one where the process is largely managed by the nonprofit, with businesses providing little more than monetary resources or in-kind donations in response to specific “asks.” This article explores the Transformative Impact Model, a new approach to corporate donor-led giving employed by the Wynn Resorts Foundation that allows community partners to take ownership of capital improvement projects.
- In support of two such projects for a pair of nonprofits in Las Vegas, Nevada, the foundation not only lent its expertise, but also leveraged its professional network to encourage and coordinate in-kind donations and cash gifts — a process that normally would have been led by the organizations themselves through capital campaigns. In addition, the foundation's engagement of leadership and front-line employees from Wynn Resorts Management in these philanthropic efforts led to new and lasting volunteer relationships with the two nonprofits.
- This article reviews some traditional approaches to corporate-led donor community engagement before it examines the planning, coordination, and completion of the Las Vegas projects. It goes on to outline unique elements of the Transformative Impact Model, and discusses the strengths and challenges that shape the model's applicability to other funders and communities.

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The capital projects, part of a philanthropic effort undertaken by the foundation and the two nonprofits from 2016 to 2019, were unique in their reliance on Wynn Resorts Management's networks and its business partners to resource work that nonprofits more commonly manage themselves through capital campaigns. The TIM facilitated ownership of the projects by the foundation's community partners and engagement with both leadership-level and front-line Wynn Resorts employees in large-scale, volunteer philanthropic efforts.

### **Corporate Social Responsibility**

Relationships between nonprofits and businesses are complex and ever evolving, with a broad range of political, commercial, strategic, and philanthropic purposes (Suárez & Hwang, 2013; Galaskiewicz & Sinclair Colman, 2006). The dominant pattern, however, is one in which donations are primarily monetary, the process is largely managed by the nonprofit, and businesses provide little more than funding or in-kind donations in response to specific "asks" or giving categories defined by funders (Patrizi & Heid Thompson, 2011). These and other traditional approaches to giving also include grants and corporate sponsorships, and many businesses encourage employees to contribute their time or money directly to nonprofits or by participating in events intended to draw attention to corporate philanthropic efforts.

### **Corporate Giving**

Corporate philanthropy is often part of the larger strategy of corporate social responsibility (CSR), defined by Lantos (2002) as "certain corporate community service activities that accomplish strategic business goals" (p. 207). The benefits of CSR can include financial savings and support for nonprofits and communities as well as goodwill, tax benefits, and positive public relations for businesses (Drews, 2010); CSR has even been linked to positive shareholder valuation (Wan-Jan, 2006). But these efforts also draw frequent criticism as little more than token public relations and marketing activities.

Many CSR activities mirror those of foundations. Corporations will often define a giving strategy and create a grantmaking or other engagement process to identify and evaluate beneficiaries. These approaches often ask nonprofits to submit proposals in response to grant opportunities or otherwise rely on them to build relationships with funders. This process can take a large investment of time and energy on the part of a nonprofit, which nevertheless is likely to see it as necessary to create trust and gain advantage when seeking corporate and other large-donor support (Faulk, Willems, McGinnis Johnson, & Stewart, 2016). Other methods of building these relationships include large-scale social events, such as gala fundraisers, or even strategic recruitment of a corporate manager to fill a seat on a nonprofit's board.

Some critics have characterized corporate donors and foundations involved in traditional philanthropy as little more than charitable banks that support the costs of carrying out community work in exchange for goodwill, tax benefits, and positive public relations (Brown, David, & Sharma, 2020). While galas and branded events provide a platform for corporate sponsors to showcase their philanthropy, such forms of engagement that require little active donor participation rarely change relationships among nonprofits, donors, and the community; nor do they capitalize on such corporate assets as a funder's network or knowledge base.

In traditional philanthropy, the primary interactions between donors and grantees consist of relationship building prior to the “ask” and accountability measures after the funds have been awarded — similar to contractual relationships, which are often conducted at a distance. The grantee is the primary driver of the outcomes and draws from its own expertise and experience to carry out the work, often with little further support from donors.

This largely passive approach has also been criticized as too distant from the actual work in a community (Patrizi & Heid Thompson, 2011) — a disconnect that can limit strategic thinking as well as direct involvement from other community stakeholders, thereby depriving donors of information that most accurately relates what is happening on the ground. This kind of failure to engage the abilities and deep knowledge of community partners blunts the overall impact of funders’ investments.

Some recent critiques of philanthropy and CSR argue that a strategic perspective focused on collaborative value creation would result in better outcomes for both nonprofits and corporate partners (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012). Collaborative value creation depends on a stronger commitment from funders to not only invest in change, but to also help create it in partnership with others in the community. This approach requires strategies that engage organizations with a broad range of assets and skills that can be brought to bear on community needs.

Despite calls for more effective philanthropy, it is relatively unclear how to improve the current models of corporate giving in a way that increases the benefits to the donor and the community.

### In-Kind Donations

Broadly defined, in-kind donations “include any donation of goods or services for a charitable purpose” (Barth, 2016, p. 48). In particular, many businesses have in-kind giving programs that donate unused goods or food to nonprofit organizations or encourage employees to volunteer for a particular activity (Suárez & Hwang, 2013).

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These donations are usually made, again, from a distance, with employees often choosing the organization or project they want to support. In-kind donation programs are often based upon the surplus goods that individuals and organizations have available that can be repurposed for philanthropy.

In-kind donations of employee labor have been under-studied — in part because employee volunteer efforts are usually tracked by the employer rather than by nonprofits or volunteer organizers (Gautier, Pache, & Chowdhury, 2013), so little is known about their impact on donors or recipients of the goods and services. Some recent research, however, suggests that corporate volunteer programs are of benefit to the volunteers themselves (Rodell, 2013). This research suggests that employees can find meaning in their volunteer roles that they do not find in their work, which in turn might have a spillover effect on job performance that benefits employers and employees.

A lack of strategic thinking behind many in-kind donation efforts has led to criticism that they can create as many problems as they might solve. Among the research that does exist is

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into donations of inappropriate materials that were not immediately useful and whose influx created logistical challenges for already over-taxed response managers (Islam, Vande Vate, Heggstuen, Nordenson, & Dolan, 2013). This suggests that in-kind donations could be more valuable with better coordination, which can be achieved only by working directly with nonprofits and those they serve.

## Case Studies

The first of the two Wynn Resorts Foundation's Las Vegas projects targeted for intervention through the TIM was a seven-day build of the Veterans Village Crisis Intervention Center; the second was an extensive remodeling of The Shade Tree. Each provided a vehicle for deeper engagement with Wynn employees and community partners. Using these cases, we will identify key aspects of the TIM and its potential to deepen impact in other settings.

### Veterans Village Build

While nonprofits typically initiate capital projects with a traditional grant application or specific request for financial support, the 2017 Veterans Village Crisis Intervention Center build evolved through an existing relationship between the organization and Wynn's director of initiatives for military veterans. This relationship allowed both partners to work outside of their typical roles — a key element in the TIM approach.

The Veterans Village, which now operates as part of the SHARE Village Las Vegas, focused

on housing and feeding homeless veterans and connecting them to benefits through the Veterans Administration and other programs. The crisis center was one of the key buildings in the Veterans Village master plan to expand shelter assistance, which called for a complex of new and repurposed housing units for individuals and families.

The nonprofit initially reached out to the foundation to create an architectural design for the center, but a team of construction professionals from Wynn Resorts Management decided to go further and approach businesses that had done work with Wynn Resorts. From architects to tilers, representatives from local professions and construction trades were convened at a series of meetings where the foundation presented a plan to build the crisis center in a single week. Wynn managers then asked those in the room to verbally commit to pieces of the project. Bringing together a range of (often competing) firms in a cooperative effort created the opportunity for a larger overall contribution to Veterans Village than would have been possible from a single donor.

At the end of the seven days, the value of the Veterans Village build totaled \$1.2 million. The bulk of that came from in-kind donations: volunteers from Wynn Resorts Management and local trades who gave their time and skills to the build itself, and gifts of materials and funding for labor and equipment. The project lead was a Wynn Resorts executive in charge of construction for the company; others from the Wynn team of volunteers helped the project clear hurdles including obtaining local permits and inspections within this short timeline so the build could be completed in a week.

The scale of the effort entailed a range of involvement from the wider community, which has helped cement a network of relationships with project participants and the nonprofit.

### The Shade Tree Renovation

The Shade Tree project was an upgrade of an existing facility, and much of the work involved renovations to meet the growing demand for

shelter services in Las Vegas. While somewhat smaller in scale than the Veterans Village build, The Shade Tree presented unique challenges because the facility remained in use during the work.

The Shade Tree assists abused, homeless, and crisis-affected women and their children. Nevada's only 24-hour shelter and the largest of its kind in the state, provides case management, limited health care, and emergency shelter services. Before the involvement of the foundation, The Shade Tree had a high level of staff and leadership turnover as it faced some financial and management difficulties.

As with the Veterans Village build, foundation leaders approached the construction team at Wynn Resorts and company management obtained commitments from its suppliers and contractors for pieces of The Shade Tree project. The initial target for improvements was a kitchen that lacked adequate capacity and did not meet standards for safe handling and preparation of food for the large number of people the shelter served each day. A tour of the building by foundation staff revealed other capital improvement needs, including a bathroom renovation undertaken by an earlier donor that had been left unfinished for 11 months due to a lack of volunteers.

An additional challenge for this project was the need for security: a number of shelter residents were fleeing domestic violence and required protection. A construction wall was built to separate the work crews from the residents; stricter background checks were instituted and all on the site were required to sign in and out; and guards were hired to direct workers and foot traffic.

In addition to about \$3 million of capital improvements — The Shade Tree gained a full industrial kitchen and renovated its bathrooms and the entire second and third floors — the project facilitated lasting relationships between the shelter and the businesses whose in-kind donations were key to its success. And as the work progressed and additional needs surfaced

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for both the organization and its building, new volunteer commitments from Wynn employees supplied accounting, public relations, marketing, and other management supports. Foundation leadership also reached out to front-line employees at Wynn Resorts, who volunteered to prepare food and beverages for The Shade Tree fundraisers and holiday celebrations for shelter residents. One of the project leads became a member of the shelter's board, and thus was well-placed to follow up on remaining project details. As a result, what began as a capital project became a driver of greater community involvement not only from the foundation and Wynn executives, but also from the company's larger employee base — giving The Shade Tree opportunities to draw upon a broad range of competencies and expertise to support its services to the community.

## Discussion

There are four key elements to the TIM approach and its success with capacity-building efforts for nonprofit organizations: it builds on existing relationships; emerges as a vehicle for greater cooperation and community involvement among local funders, businesses, volunteers, and nonprofits; provides



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a mechanism to pair traditional funding with useful in-kind donations; and frees partners to act outside of customary legalistic and contractual relationships.

Below is an examination of these aspects and their implications for other funders considering adapting the model or some of its elements to their giving strategies.

#### **Element No. 1: Built Upon Existing Relationships**

While it is not unusual for nonprofits and foundations to form strong relationships, the TIM used these relationships as a starting place for deeper engagement. The Veterans Village and The Shade Tree projects were initiated through existing relationships between the organizations and the foundation. That connection had established the mutual trust necessary to embark on new, large-scale efforts and to allow the work to evolve differently than it would within a more traditional funding model.

These relationships were crucial not only to the delivery of the project, but also to its development. Instead of reliance on a typical grant application or ask, the work was undertaken after the funder observed needs when on site for other projects. This approach makes funders part of strategy development — beyond responding to a demonstrated need, they can address

other issues they encounter. This deeper level of involvement changes the funder's role from a banker to an active participant in the implementation and planning stages of capital projects.

For the Wynn Resort Foundation, involvement at all stages of the projects also made it an active partner in the day-to-day problem solving of the two nonprofits. This engagement also allowed both projects to evolve as needs changed. The initial plan for The Shade Tree, for example, involved only a kitchen renovation, but the scope expanded as the funder grew more aware of the shelter's ongoing operational problems. The project lead reached out to his professional networks for additional in-kind support — a direct response to observed need and not just a way to dispose of excess goods, as is common with in-kind donations.

#### **Element 2: A Vehicle for Involvement**

Capital projects usually are accomplished through cash donations, often take three to five years to complete, and frequently depend on a handful of large donors (Woronkiewicz & Nicholson-Crotty, 2017). Each of the two projects undertaken in Las Vegas under the TIM took at the most 18 months from design to completion and had active participation from the primary donor and its network in support of every aspect of the work, involving contributions from other funders and volunteer suppliers and tradespeople.

These projects also became a way for the foundation to draw attention to the work and needs of Veterans Village and The Shade Tree. Some of the relationships between project volunteers and the nonprofits endured beyond the completion of the capital project — relationships that represent assets for the organizations. Some individuals who were initially asked to make in-kind contributions became longer-term donors and even board members.

The involvement of a greater number of individuals and businesses allowed for personal attachments and relationships to form in ways unlike those made through traditional capital

campaigns or fundraisers. Individuals who were not usually asked to engage in philanthropy — tradespeople and small-business owners who are rarely approached outside of their respective social circles, for example. played a large role in the Las Vegas projects. And direct involvement made the accomplishment of the task personal. As participants talked about their work on Veterans Village and The Shade Tree, some mentioned being previously unaware of the nonprofits' importance to the community, and many often spoke of the pride and satisfaction they felt in meeting such vital needs. A tradesperson who volunteered to contribute to the project said in an interview, "I had heard of the Shade Tree before, but it wasn't until I toured the facility that I understood how I could help."

### Element 3:

#### Pairing In-Kind and Cash Donations

Another key element of the TIM is the pairing of in-kind donations of time and goods with cash donations intended for a specific need. While it is not uncommon for corporate donors to give both in-kind and cash donations to charitable organizations, the Las Vegas projects combined those donations toward larger goals.

The focus on skilled in-kind labor was critical to the success of both projects. The broad range of individual volunteer talent meant work could be accomplished at much lower direct cost than most capital projects and on a much shorter timeline from initiation to completion, increasing the impact of each donated dollar. When The Shade Tree needed tile sourced and installed, for example, the Wynn Resorts team reached out to small businesses in its network that were willing to take on a piece of the renovation work. Often this meant competing firms worked together on the shelter improvements.

The limited scope and timeline of the Veterans Village project also made it easier for volunteers to commit their time directly during the week of the build. In contrast, The Shade Tree's longer timeline meant that instead of individual workers, it was primarily businesses offering paid labor and time to the project.

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### Element 4:

#### Handshakes Versus Written Commitments

Suppliers, Wynn's executives, and foundation staff made clear in interviews that trust and leadership — specifically that of the project lead — were crucial to the process, freeing the participants to act outside of customary legalistic and contractual relationships.

In practical terms, this meant many commitments were made via verbal agreement or handshake, rather than a contract or pledge. This sped up the projects and allowed them to live outside of normal business relationships, since these commitments did not require attorneys or other third parties.

The use of informal commitments also underscores the importance of networks and other long-term relationships to the success of the projects. Setbacks were approached as problems to be solved as a group, as opposed to unfulfilled contractual obligations; the project lead reached out to other volunteer partners to address unmet needs and keep the work on schedule.



*Instead of placing the onus on nonprofits to secure capacity-building support from individual donors, the Wynn Resorts Foundation engaged its networks and knowledge base to meet the identified capital needs of two Las Vegas nonprofits.*

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### **The TIM's Strengths and Limitations**

The key strength of the Transformative Impact Model is how it moves away from more traditional hands-off approaches to giving in order to leverage specific assets and abilities of corporate funders. Instead of placing the onus on nonprofits to secure capacity-building support from individual donors, the Wynn Resorts Foundation engaged its networks and knowledge base to meet the identified capital needs of two Las Vegas nonprofits.

Access to a corporate partner's network can extend the reach of a nonprofit to many of those in the community with whom they had no previous relationship, expanding opportunities for the project at hand and for future fundraising and volunteer recruitment. Another advantage, research has shown, is that corporate connections can lend a legitimacy to nonprofits (Galaskiewicz & Sinclair Colman, 2006) that can increase both the likelihood of support from other donors in the network and the overall visibility of the nonprofit.

Another strength of the TIM as an approach to the Las Vegas projects was the level of involvement and commitment it fostered from the foundation and the other partners. These organizations and individuals were deeply engaged from the planning to the completion of the capital improvements, which seemed to help overcome many challenges and build trust

among the stakeholders that freed participants to operate outside of standard procedures, creating opportunities to lower costs through informal agreements. While largely seen as an asset to the Las Vegas projects, for their managers it is likely the informal structure also increased the risks and complexity of the work. The networks' longstanding relationships and resultant mutual trust made those exchanges possible, but might create challenges for funders other than the Wynn Resorts Foundation.

The TIM was also key to the relative speed with which the Veterans Village and The Shade Tree projects were completed. While relatively small in comparison to many capital projects, they served important functions and their completion had an enormously beneficial impact on daily operations and client services.

For all of its strengths, however, the TIM is not necessarily suited to all or even most corporations or communities. The model has several clear limitations:

- *Dependence on a small group of leaders.* Participants emphasized how important leadership was to the achievements in Las Vegas. The level of leadership and project management skills available from the Wynn Resorts network could be hard to replicate elsewhere, and the diverse skill sets brought to bear are likely not found in many corporations.
- *The lack of a formal legal process.* While handshakes and verbal agreements were reliable bases for the foundation's work with Veterans Village and The Shade Tree, the level of trust that enabled large-scale work to proceed from those arrangements is unusual. Access to a wide donor network of businesses, tradespeople, and volunteers is a boon for nonprofit organizations, but without deep mutual trust and substantial coordination with tradespeople and other volunteers, standard legal protections would be necessary. And that, in turn, might lessen enthusiasm for volunteer participation among smaller firms.

- *The realities of competition.* In markets other than Las Vegas, it may be much more difficult to persuade competing tradespeople and suppliers to volunteer for a capital project. The domination by a single industry of the market structure in Las Vegas, where those sectors tend to do a large proportion of their business with casinos and resorts, is a likely factor in the foundation's ability to generate support for its projects. Since Wynn Resorts is a large and consistent source of work, it may have more leverage to informally enforce handshake deals. Further evidence of this is the fact that the model has not been used at Wynn's other properties — specifically Encore Boston Harbor, in a community where the foundation relies much more on traditional giving and charitable endeavors.
- *A demanding level of dedication.* The TIM requires intensive commitment and a high level of skill from project leaders. While the timeline was relatively short for on-site work on both projects, several months were devoted to preplanning and development,

and coordination of the labor to complete the project goals required almost a year. Maintaining nine months of continuous coordination among competing and individual developers, builders, and suppliers is a substantial investment that might not be possible for many donors.

There are significant obstacles to the feasibility of the TIM — it is not the blueprint for the replacement of more traditional forms of giving anytime soon. Regardless, the Transformative Impact Model stands out as an innovative and extremely impactful approach for nonprofits pursuing smaller capital projects and construction firms that perform such work. The model speaks to the philanthropic impact that can be achieved by combining the talents of highly skilled volunteers and in-kind and cash donations.

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