



GEO PUBLICATION SUMMARY

Widespread Empathy

5 Steps to Achieving Greater Impact in Philanthropy

While philanthropy often originates out of compassion and concern for others, grantmakers sometimes forget to make empathy a core driver of their grantmaking. As described in this publication, produced jointly by GEO and Jump Associates, “widespread empathy” allows grantmakers to base their decisions and actions on an authentic, firsthand understanding of the perspectives of grantees, community members and other partners.

INTRODUCTION

Many people inside and outside of philanthropy express concerns that grantmakers are disconnected from their communities and from the organizations they support, as well as the people whom those organizations serve. Widespread empathy is the antidote to this malady.

In philanthropic organizations that have widespread empathy, every single person — not just program officers, but the entire board and executive leadership, finance, HR, communications, administrative staff and others — has an immediate sense of the true needs, concerns and priorities of grantees and communities and what solutions will best meet those needs.

EMPATHY BRIGHT SPOTS

GEO and Jump Associates have identified a diverse cross section of organizations that are working in ways that orient them toward connecting deeply with grantees and communities. For example:

- The William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund has hired community liaisons whose job is to build deeper connections between the grantmaker and the Connecticut communities that are the focus of its early learning investments. *The result: The grantmaker is better able to anticipate each community’s needs in order to achieve its early education goals.*
- The Wilburforce Foundation built a field staff and opened a Bozeman, Mont., office so it could connect more directly with grantees in the regions where they work. *The result: Foundation staff members engage in deeper, richer conversations with grantees, who regularly give Wilburforce high marks as a valued partner in their work.*
- After recognizing that many of its grantees regarded the grant reporting process as a largely ceremonial chore, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation in New Jersey decided to start from scratch and create a new system. *The result: The grantmaker and its grantees worked together to design an assessment process that grantees say has helped them chart a path to higher levels of performance and impact.*

FIVE STEPS TO HIGH-EMPATHY GRANTMAKING

GEO and Jump Associates also identified five specific practices and principles that can bring more empathy to grantmaking.

1. Make it about others, not about you.

High-empathy grantmakers look at their organizations' grantmaking strategies, policies, processes and requirements through the eyes of grantees and others, and they ask questions about whether their organization is doing the right thing by its grantees and applicants for support.

High-empathy grantmakers also have an intuitive understanding of how important it is for others to feel ownership of their work and priorities. As a result, they are conscious of ensuring that they remain behind the scenes, and that nonprofits and community members are out front in shaping and taking credit for their work.

2. Get out of the office.

Nothing beats a face-to-face visit to the very places where a grantmaker's stakeholders live their lives and do their work. This allows grantmakers to develop and deepen relationships and to see the world through the eyes of the people who are the focus of their work.

Getting out of the office doesn't mean simply engaging in exploratory site visits, however. Often, it means working hand in hand with others in the community — recognizing that your mandate does not begin and end at the front doors of your offices. Other ways for grantmakers to “get out there” include volunteering and serving on nonprofit boards, in local government and in civic organizations.

3. Bring the outside in.

High-empathy foundations actively try to remove the barriers that can contribute to their isolation and anonymity in their communities. One way they start is by bringing into the organization the kind of people it serves — including nonprofit executive directors and staff, as well as representatives of the communities that are the focus of its grantmaking.

Beyond hiring “customers,” high-empathy foundations also take other steps to ensure that they are bringing the outside in. These include adding nonprofit and community representatives to the board; adding comment pages and other interactive elements to the foundation website; inviting grantees to share stories with the staff and board in formal and informal settings; and even populating the walls of the office with stories, photos and artwork that reflect what's happening in the community and among the people they serve.

4. Invest in what it takes.

In many ways, the shift to high-empathy grantmaking can happen through relatively simple steps that foundations and their people can take to connect in more authentic ways with others. At the same time, however, grantmakers should recognize that creating widespread empathy in their organizations may require stepped-up investments in operations. Some grantmakers, for example, have decided to add staff as a way to foster stronger connections with grantees.

Beyond staffing, grantmakers also might find they have to invest in new processes, new systems and new strategies to nurture deeper connections between their people and the communities they serve. One caveat as grantmakers consider what they can do to forge deeper relationships with grantees and others: Always be conscious of your impact on the capacity of grantees to stay focused on their work. Stronger connections and openness to listening and hearing grantee concerns are almost always welcome; interfering in grantees' day-to-day operations is not.

5. Lead from the top.

One of the most essential characteristics of high-empathy organizations is a leadership team that walks the talk and demonstrates high-empathy behaviors in its everyday work.

To change the culture and overarching strategies of the organization, leaders must embrace widespread empathy as the pathway to better results for the organization and its stakeholders. That means getting everybody to focus on what's really going to make a difference for the people and the organizations that are central to the mission of the organization.

Leaders also should review what the foundation does (and how it can do more) to promote work practices that encourage and sustain empathy, from deep listening and reflection to looking at the world through the eyes of grantees and others.

CONCLUSION

Every person is born with the ability to connect with other people. Unfortunately, the world of work sometimes requires that we set aside that instinct. Because of organizational cultures and the confines of our jobs, we tend to place facts ahead of empathy and intuition. We tend to develop systems and processes that, while well intentioned, often diminish what a more human perspective can bring to our work.

But it is possible to reclaim empathy. For grantmakers, doing so requires a specific mindset that values and prioritizes deeper connections with grantees and others. Rather than seeing themselves and their stakeholders as "us and them," high-empathy grantmakers start to see themselves as part of the same team. They start to think like their "customers." They find themselves anticipating challenges and opportunities facing grantees and communities and thinking in advance about how best to help.