


Amplified Needs Require Amplifying Voices

July 7, 2020 Melinda Tuan

Last month, I had the privilege of speaking on a [webinar](#) hosted by the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) to discuss its recent research report, *[Funder Support During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)*. As I've reflected on the comments of my co-speakers, Chitra Hanstad from World Relief Seattle and Stephanie Hull from Girls, Inc. (notably, fellow women of color), as well as conversations I've had with nonprofit and philanthropic leaders since then, I'd like to share my reflections on three key findings from CEP's study.

1. The negative impacts of COVID-19 have been magnified for nonprofits that provide direct services and serve historically disadvantaged communities.

The finding that COVID-19 has had devastating impacts on nonprofits is not surprising (although nonetheless awful). While I worry for the nonprofits, I can only imagine what this means for the people who are living in especially hard-hit communities, which are predominantly Black, indigenous, and other communities of color. How are people experiencing this pandemic and how will they survive if the nonprofits they rely on for services are under siege? Who is listening to the people in these communities and can respond to their needs? 

Chitra and I recently talked about how, for her, listening to community means talking with her staff at World Relief, many of whom are immigrants, refugees, and asylees themselves

and reside in the community. Because Chitra and her staff have the lived experience of those they serve, they can speak directly with their own families and community members about what they need most. In the words of Bryan Stevenson, they know how to “get proximate.”

And yet, I believe there is still a need for nonprofits to implement more systematic ways of listening to people and communities so that they can ensure they are collecting representative feedback and listening to all voices on an ongoing basis. Through Fund for Shared Insight’s Listen4Good initiative, we are providing nonprofits and funders with tools to help them listen systematically and act on what they hear, so that people themselves can define ways to improve their lives, especially in the wake of COVID-19.

2. Nonprofit organizations led by CEOs who identify as people of color rate their staffed foundation funders significantly higher on helpfulness than nonprofits led by CEOs who do not.

On the webinar, CEP President Phil Buchanan, who was moderating, mused about why this might be the case. He noted that CEP staff were surprised by this finding and speculated that maybe foundations are paying more attention to organizations that are led by people of color during this crisis. Or, he said, maybe leaders of color started with lower expectations of their foundation partners, and so any increase in help is rated as significant.

I have a variation on this explanation — borne out of conversations with many nonprofit leaders of color, the fact that less than 20 percent of nonprofit organizations are led by people of color, and information from recent studies. Data show, for example, that these organizations have fewer foundation partners and lower rates of unrestricted grants than those led by white people. Given this, it’s possible that because foundation partners for organizations led by people of color are so few and so hard fought, anything they do is appreciated and considered helpful.

This came through when, following the CEP webinar, one nonprofit leader of color described to me her relationship with one of her foundation partners, saying: “I love them. I

don't care how nasty they are, because if I have a foundation who notices we exist and is giving me a huge chunk of change — I will put up with anything.” I have heard this kind of comment from nonprofit leaders of all identities over the years. This destructive power dynamic is not new, is still incredibly frustrating, and should not exist.

Almost 20 years ago, I published a piece in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* called “The Dance of Deceit,” in which I wrote: “Nonprofits are afraid to speak out against poor practices in the sector out of fear that foundations will pull their funding...The risk of offending foundation folks and losing precious funding is too great for most nonprofits.”

This dynamic has not changed over the decades. And I'd wager that the power differential between white funders and leaders of color has always been more pronounced, given that 92 percent of foundation CEOs and nearly three-quarters of foundation program officers are white.


3. Major donors are significantly less likely to have talked with nonprofits that are led by women about how they will support them in the future.

Right after the CEP webinar concluded, a colleague of mine, a white man who is a major donor and someone I consider relatively enlightened, emailed me. His first comment was: “The thing about female vs. male executive directors is just so nuts,” followed up with, “Are philanthropists all still chauvinistic?” When our previously rapid-fire email exchange halted after that question, he then wrote, “I sounded like a dumba** white man there, didn't I? Sorry.”

I'll admit that I had paused the conversation, taken aback and discouraged by my colleague's surprise in the face of evidence of gender inequities in philanthropy. It made me think about how sexism is invisible to most men, even enlightened ones, just like racism is invisible to most white people, even those with the best intentions.

To dig further into this evidence, I asked CEP to disaggregate the research findings to see how nonprofit leaders who are women of color experienced major donor and foundation helpfulness and willingness to talk with them about their support in the future. Though the

data set was unfortunately too small to be able to do that level of analysis, other research findings are clear: organizations led by people of color are less likely to be funded by foundations and major donors, and less likely to be funded with unrestricted support compared with organizations led by white people. And, what's more, groups led by Black women receive less money than those led by Black men or white women.

As Chitra noted on the webinar, “People in general give to people they know, and trust is built through social networks. If you're not in those social networks, it's hard to be part of that conversation.” 

Implications for Philanthropy

What can foundation staff and major donors do to address the inequities in funding organizations that are led by, authentically connected to, and accountable to people of color? How can we shift our power dynamics with — and build the power of — organizations that serve communities of color, listen to the people and communities they seek to help, and respond to what they hear with integrity and respect?

First, foundations can diversify their staff by hiring people who reflect the racial background and lived experience of the communities they seek to help.

Second, foundations can change and become positive and supportive places for people of color to thrive and succeed.

Third, foundation staff and major donors can build authentic and meaningful relationships with nonprofit leaders of color, prioritize funding organizations that serve and are led by communities of color, and connect those leaders and organizations with other funders.

And fourth, everyone can make efforts to be proximate to the people and communities they seek to help, striving to listen, understand, and then act on what they hear.

As I continue in my role as managing director at Fund for Shared Insight, a national funder collaborative composed of many of the largest foundations in the country, I am excited that for the next phase of our work through 2023, we will have three women of color in leadership. Incoming co-chair Lissette Rodriguez (Latina) from Blue Meridian

Partners/Edna McConnell Clark Foundation will be joining me (Chinese American) and current co-chair Kelley Gulley (Black American) from the James Irvine Foundation.

Together, we will build on the strong foundation and achievements of Shared Insight's first six years and the lessons we have learned about the importance of listening and centering on equity. Further, we will each bring our own lived experience from different communities of color and socio-economic and immigrant backgrounds to the work, in the hope that we can be part of the change we seek to see in philanthropy.

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