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Leadership

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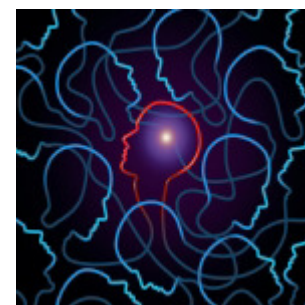
Foundations can play an essential role in generating authentic conversation on hard issues, but they must be both an equal player among community partners and an active steward of the mission.

By [David Nee & Curtis Ogden](#) | Sep. 30, 2015

In 1993, when I (David Nee) began as executive director of the Graustein Memorial Fund, we decided to be a learning organization—one that has the capacity to reflect on its own practice—within a larger network of learning communities. In our case, the larger network included the 52 cities and towns in the state of Connecticut that participate in our [Discovery Initiative](http://discovery.wcgmf.org/) (<http://discovery.wcgmf.org/>), which aims to ensure that Connecticut children from all races and income levels are ready for school at age five and successful learners by age nine.

Some of the avenues for action were obvious to us, such as supporting community collaboration, providing communities with resources to assess conditions affecting children, and helping build and execute plans to improve those conditions.

Other avenues were harder to see. Prior to my work at foundations, for example, I was a military officer, and then a civilian manager in several corrections agencies. My personal style was active, perhaps even interventionist. As the executive director of the Memorial Fund, I had to adapt my management style considerably. To match



The New Network Leader

(http://ssir.org/the_new_network/)

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the reality of collaborative work within a network, I had to process everything in conjunction with community partners, and found that forbearance was often more productive than “fixing.”

Curtis Ogden (co-author of this article) and his colleagues at the Interaction Institute for Social Change helped; they trained our staff, Discovery communities, providers, advocates, and educators in “**facilitative leadership** (<http://www.interactioninstitute.org/facilitative-leadership-for-net-impact>),” an approach to collaborative leadership and management that is rooted in creating optimal conditions for broad-based ownership and agency in social change efforts. This capacity-building work was timely, given the evolution of the communities’ collaborative practice over years. Nonetheless, the process was necessarily emergent and took many participants far out of our comfort zone; the open-ended, systemic nature of the conversation made personal expertise and experience important yet insufficient on its own.

Perhaps due to the Memorial Fund’s sustained support of early childhood development and openness about our own learning curve, communities and advocates asked us to convene a group of stakeholders who could help build an early childhood system that would work for all. Together with various leaders and communities, we embraced systems thinking to figure out why Connecticut was achieving less-than-optimal results for young children. This approach invited participants to look at more deeply rooted causes and areas for leverage in the complex early childhood system—both formal institutional and informal relational dynamics. We identified “causal loops” leading back to racism and economic inequity, and the toxic role they play in the development of many children at an early age.

Facilitating Hard Conversations

Our staff quickly realized that we had to move the discussion of these hard issues—starting with racial inequality—out into the community, even if we had not become experts ourselves on the issue. We played an important role in creating safe spaces for open conversation about structural and systemic challenges. Specifically, Curtis and his colleague Melinda Weekes played a lead role in designing and facilitating dialogues where people could talk about and explore sensitive issues without feeling a need to know the answers. As Curtis and Melinda often reminded us, “Sometimes the rush to a solution is a privileged move that avoids discussion of the real issues.” The conversations we fostered rippled into other arenas and brought the issues of systemic racism to more public spaces, including the annual Stone Soup Conference. As one state government

leader said, “We need this work to continue. This is a conversation that we aren’t having [but need to have] in my agency.”

In the process, we developed a **set of publicly accessible communication tools**

(<http://discovery.wcgmf.org/>) about racial and economic inequity. More importantly, we now work within an active community dedicated to early childhood development, as well as with an alumni group that includes philanthropists and government providers. This community has a deep understanding of how racial inequity plays out in resource allocation and a strong commitment to addressing that problem, however it surfaces. As a result, the difficult conversations that need to happen can and will, even without direct support from the Memorial Fund.

Convening people to explore hard issues and hold real conversations is one of the most important services that a foundation can provide. Foundations are a primary supporter of larger networks; they are stewards and must take prudent steps now to ensure a sustainable future for all. Yet, while leading and facilitating tough conversations can be immensely valuable to any effort, foundations must operate within a context of humility. Many have noted that this kind of “network practice” is young and that the most honest role for participants, including funders, is that of perpetual student. This was certainly true in our case. Given the complexity of changing social systems, this work isn’t a matter of imparting wisdom; it’s about sharing a learning journey.

Distributed Leadership

One moment of learning for me was particularly humbling and instructive. Our program officer who oversees community grants noticed that the director of a local collaborative group and the nature of the work did not fit. I suggested a meeting with the collaborative’s fiscal sponsor to terminate the collaborative director. The program officer suggested that we hire a consultant to provide technical assistance on governance and collaborative oversight. I agreed. At first it didn’t work, but after essentially the same conversation, we decided to try a different consultant. Months later, through the consultant’s guidance, the collaborative’s governing body (a group of parents) negotiated a refined job description and set of expectations with the director. Shortly after, the director and the collaborative parted company by mutual agreement.

This turn of events was a critical pivot point for me. Had I followed my own instincts and intervened with the local sponsor, two powerful institutions would have colluded in “fixing” the

problem, and there would have been no opportunity for the community to learn. Following the advice of our program officer, who worked much more closely with the community, we created space for the parents to develop a deeper level of collective efficacy. Strong local parent leadership, right up to the governance level, has been a hallmark of that community's collaboration ever since. Curtis refers to this as “**making the periphery the norm** (<http://www.interactioninstitute.org/networks-for-change-full-benefit-accounting>),” which improves overall network impact and sustainability.

From its beginning in 2001, there has been no Discovery branding on our partners' efforts, and this increases community ownership of each local collaborative. Apart from a Discovery logo on Memorial Fund-generated materials, each community chooses its own name and develops its own identity. And from the foundation's point of view, this variation is desirable.

Embedding an ethos of stewardship and operating with a focus on community building over intervention compels foundations to strike a balance. *An authoritative stance to decision-making is incompatible with the widespread learning that is the beating heart of collaboration.*

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Network leadership principles call for foundation leaders to share power with communities and other stakeholders, working alongside their peers as equal partners. Occasionally, a foundation should stand up and protect the integrity or sustainability of hard discussions that otherwise are unlikely to happen.

Perhaps because discussing race, racism, and privilege is sometimes disquieting, some collaborators defected early on, raising the question of whether our work should continue in this direction at all. My answer was yes; I didn't feel the group had yet reached a logical stopping point. Our discussions continued with a somewhat smaller but even more committed group, and ended with the legacy described above: a community with a deep commitment to tackling the roots of inequity that deprive so many children of the quality early childhood they deserve.



David Nee (@davidnee) is a senior consultant at the Social Impact Exchange. Previously, as executive director of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund for over 20 years, Nee helped create a network of early-childhood collaboratives in 52 Connecticut cities and towns, an experience that relates to the principles of humility over brand, and trust over control.



Curtis Ogden (@curtisogden) is a senior associate at the Interaction Institute for Social Change. In that role, he designed and facilitated a two-year process that allowed diverse representatives of the Discovery Initiative to examine fundamental causes of social and educational inequity in Connecticut. The result was Right from the Start, a communications "initiative within the initiative" that made information about racial and economic inequity available to broad audiences through the Memorial Fund's website and convenings, including the Memorial Fund's annual Stone Soup Conference.

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