

We are seeing concrete examples of what can happen when funders recognize relationships as having a place at the theory-of-change table.

By John Esterle, Malka Kopell, & Palma Strand



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From The Kids' Table To The Adults' Table

Taking Relationships Seriously in a World of Networks

In recent years, funders, practitioners and academics have been paying increased attention to the key role social networks play in addressing issues of public concern. Collective impact, funder-supported grantee networks, and cross-sector collaborations all reflect this trend.

Our own experiences—in philanthropy, consulting, and academia—lead us to applaud the network “crescendo” and join the chorus. We want to pause the music for a minute, however, to issue a challenge.

Networks are made up of people—people who are in relationship with each other. But we’ve noticed that paeans to *networks* do not always encompass lifting up the importance of *relationships*. For networks to fulfill their promise, that has to change.

It’s hardly news to say that personal relationships built on trust, respect, and empathy are an important factor in creating resilient, adaptive, and innovative organizations and communities. Indeed, people working in a range of contexts and settings often say that personal relationships are foundational to their work. Why is it then that when it comes to writing grant

are understood to be two distinct aspects of the human experience, and Western culture reveres the head, the cognitive. As Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am.” Recognizing both that the dichotomy between “hard skills” and “soft skills” is false and that “soft” and “hard” skills are equally essential moves us toward taking relationships seriously.

Second, we live in an individualistic culture. Independence, personal autonomy, and freedom have historically been our most cherished values. Networks and their relationships, however, embody *interdependence*. Liberian peace activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Leymah Gbowee has described the African concept of “ubuntu” as capturing an awareness that “I am what I am because of who we all are.” Recognizing that the individual and the social are inextricably intertwined supports taking relationships seriously.

Third, we lack agreed-upon criteria for measuring relationships and their quality, perhaps because of our historical and cultural inattention to and undervaluation of relationships. With increased attention to and respect for relationships, progress on this front is already

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proposals and measuring impact, relationships - and the processes involved in building them—too often recede into the background?

The need to start prominently raising this question is what moved the three of us to write this article. Our operating assumption is that taking networks seriously means that we all—especially funders—must take relationships seriously. Devoting adequate resources to building and sustaining authentic relationships is key to greater progress on a wide variety of fronts.

FROM THE KIDS’ TABLE TO THE ADULTS’

TABLE

There is often an awkwardness in taking relationships seriously. Particularly when it comes to funding decisions, relationships have been seated, so to speak, at the “kids’ table.” We think that it is time to bring them to the fore, to invite them to the “adults’ table”—even though this may entail a gawky “adolescent” phase. Identifying sources of discomfort will help.

Four sources of discomfort are immediately apparent. First, our society has traditionally seen the cultivation of relationships as a “soft skill,” a manifestation of heart rather than head. Heart and head

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“SOFT” RELATIONSHIPS FOR “HARD” PROBLEMS

But what do high-quality relationships really bring to the table? For one, they often bring a new perspective. According to Martha McCoy, Executive Director of Everyday Democracy, an operating foundation that focuses on community change, “if you and your network partners aren’t in a good relationship, you don’t listen to each other. And more important, you don’t have the potential to *change* each other. This inhibits problem-solving.”

McCoy adds that high-quality relationships “have the power to disturb the status quo. Some people think that relationships are all about not rocking the boat – i.e., “can’t we just all get along?” But an authentic relationship can provide the catalyst and the support for difficult change.”

Matt Leighninger, Executive Director of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, a national network of civic engagement and democracy-building organizations, emphasizes that strong relationships open up perspectives on community problems: “Current problem-solving structures in communities are often fairly narrow. People in issue-based institutions don’t see the relevance of other issues or citizens with broader interests. Holistic, sustained networks of relationships help get past these silos.”

FUNDER SUPPORT FOR RELATIONSHIPS

These benefits aside, you can see how the sources of discomfort about relationships play out in terms of funding. Foundations can be notorious for their short attention spans. In the drive toward measurement and metrics, talking about relationship-building as a measure of impact may seem suspect, so it’s safer not to go there. Finally, if relationships are important, might that not apply to funders too? If they’re asked to walk their talk, what might that mean for their relationships with their grantees? With other funders? Exploring those questions asks a risk-averse sector to enter risky territory.

Fortunately, we are seeing concrete examples of what can happen when funders recognize relationships as having a place at the theory-of-change table—when funders support strengthening relationships where they are weak ... or absent. The Barr Foundation’s Fellows Program, for example, supports the “nurturing” of cooperative relationships among Boston’s non-profit leaders over time with the identified purpose of encouraging the emergence of a more “collaborative culture.” (Stanford Social Innovation Review Summer 2012)

Peter Pennekamp, President Emeritus of the Humboldt Area Foundation on California’s northern coast, describes a very intentional and strategic relationship-building initiative that addressed a stalemate between oppositional networks that pitted the timber industry against environmentalists. “By facilitating the development of relationships between local timber and environmental leaders, the existence of which at first had to be profoundly confidential due to

both sides’ perceived risk in meeting, a third network, based on concern for a shared community, was born.”

FUNDERS AS COMMUNITY MEMBERS

When funders support relationships, they open themselves up to becoming part of the relational web of their communities, which can provide additional opportunities for positive change. Leslie Medine, Executive Director of On the Move, an incubator for community initiatives driven by young leaders in Napa, California, attributes the effectiveness of a neighborhood initiative to create opportunities for Latino youth to this mutuality: “In this network, more than any other that I’ve ever been a part of, all the partners involved – the school principal, the local hospital outreach director, the primary funders and our key young leaders – all of us understand that our work is totally interdependent. To each of us this means that I literally can’t get my work done without you.”

Similarly, Lyn Wallin Ziegenbein, Executive Director of the Peter Kiewit Foundation, a private independent philanthropic trust in Omaha, Nebraska, says, “We place a high priority and value on building enduring relationships with our grantees. That aspect of our work transcends individual grants and moves our entire body of work toward Mr. Kiewit’s fundamental goal for his philanthropy: to build and sustain the communities we share, literally and figuratively. As we see it, the Omaha community *is* relationships.”

This true interdependence – including funders in the mix – paves the way for the kind of deep collaboration and problem-solving that is necessary to tackle complicated community problems.

THE CIVITY NETWORKS PROJECT TAKING RELATIONSHIPS SERIOUSLY

We are currently working together—John as funder, Malka as lead practitioner, and Palma as advisor—on a networks project that takes relationships seriously: The Civity Networks Project. Using Silicon Valley as a test site, and partnering with the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, the Project seeks to build the social trust that enables regional problem-solving by strengthening civic networks in the region.

Rather than creating a new network, the Project is designed to “tune up” the networks that currently exist in the region. As a first step, 50 leaders are chosen strategically to represent a wide range of issues, groups, sectors, and geography. Then, a deep, individualized

intervention invites each leader to see him or herself as a regional actor and to align his or her work with the good of the region as a whole.

The centerpiece of the intervention is a one-on-one in-person meeting with each leader. The intervention focuses on crystallizing each leader's intent to build

existing civic networks and the relationships within them. We believe that the relationship-focused Civity Network Pilot Project will enhance our understanding and therefore our ability to harness the power of networks. Taking relationships seriously, in our view, entails the kind of *rigor* the Project embodies.

“The Civity Networks Project focuses on relationships that enhance “civity”— cross-cutting social trust that underlies the region’s capacity to address challenges and seize opportunities.”

relationships that enhance “civity”—the kind of cross-cutting social trust that underlies the region’s capacity to address regional challenges and seize regional opportunities. From that first one-on-one meeting grow additional opportunities for each leader to deepen his or her self-reflective experience and to take additional steps to act on that experience.

The theory of change envisions these network “tune-ups” leading to “butterfly effects” that contribute to regional resilience by instigating small but important improvements in how each leader operates within his or her own networks. When key leaders pay attention to, cultivate, and enrich the location and quality of the relationships within their own networks, “civity” and social trust increase and regional problem-solving improves.

The Project includes an evaluation component to both assess Project results and gain information about

RELATIONSHIPS IN THE FOREGROUND

The Whitman Institute, the independent foundation that John leads, periodically gathers its own “network” to build and deepen relationships and to cross-fertilize stories and ideas. After its last retreat, Jon Funabiki, the Executive Director of Renaissance Journalism, an interdisciplinary center in San Francisco that identifies and sparks new journalistic models that serve communities, wrote: “Relationships have been important to me for many years. Yet they have always been in the background, rather than the foreground. I will work harder to nudge them forward from now.”

It’s time for all of us—in our various sectors—to move relationships to the foreground to enhance our picture of social change. Let’s begin; let’s experiment; let’s share what we learn.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

John Esterle is the Executive Director of The Whitman Institute, an independent foundation that invests in the power of relationships, constructive dialogue and the connections they generate to trigger problem solving and creative approaches required to achieve a healthy, peaceful, equitable and sustainable world. As President Emeritus he serves on the board of Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, is a member of LeaderSpring’s Leadership Council and Active Voice’s Advisory Committee, and co-chairs Northern California Grantmakers’ Organizational Effectiveness and Professional Development Committee.

Malka Kopell is an expert in the field of civic engagement and collaboration. In 1990, she founded Community Focus, a non-profit that works with local governments to develop and facilitate cross-sector collaboration to address tough problems in communities. She served as a program officer at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, supporting civic engagement and conflict resolution programs around the country, and she was the first managing director of the Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society at Stanford University. She currently assists governments, non-profits and foundations to develop and support stakeholder networks.

Palma Strand is a Professor of Law at the Creighton Law School, where she is associated with the Werner Institute of Negotiation and Dispute Resolution. She teaches Civic Organizing and Democracy, Local Government Law, Alternative Dispute Resolution, and Street Law among other courses. Prof. Strand has done extensive civic engagement work in metropolitan regions including Washington, DC and Omaha, NE. She has ties to the creators of the civic organizing approach and developed the concept of “civity.” She is the current Chair of the University Network for Collaborative Governance.