

What is Empathy and What Are the Benefits?

Empathy is one of the main reasons individual and institutional philanthropy exist. Grantmakers in communities across the country and around the world are mission-bound to try and help people and communities overcome challenges in order to thrive. Implicit in most grantmaker missions is the message: “We care, and we want to help.” But while philanthropy often originates out of compassion and concern for others, grantmakers sometimes forget to make empathy a core driver of our grantmaking. In this piece, we discuss the value of empathy and how it can help grantmakers make smarter grantmaking decisions.

Traditional philanthropy is entrenched in a model of hierarchy and power: Since foundations hold the money, we create formal and informal parameters within which nonprofits are forced to operate. The perception among many nonprofit and community leaders is that grantmakers are driven by our own agendas and needs, rather than by what’s best for people and organizations working at the grassroots level.

This divide is further augmented by class and race differences between foundation leaders and community members and the many processes, procedures and requirements associated with even relatively small grants. But this isn’t just an image problem. The lack of strong connections between grantmakers and our grantees and communities is often a major barrier to philanthropic effectiveness.

High-empathy grantmakers look at our grantmaking strategies, policies, processes and requirements through the eyes of grantees and others, and we always ask questions about whether our organization is doing the right thing by its grantees and applicants for support. By employing empathy throughout all our work, grantmakers can gain an intuitive understanding of why our work is important, what it’s achieving, whom it’s helping, where it’s falling short and what more needs to be done.

For more on this topic, see [*Widespread Empathy: 5 Steps to Achieving Greater Impact in Philanthropy*](#) (Washington, D.C.: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and Jump Associates, 2011.)

Defining Empathy

Empathy on an individual level is the ability to reach outside ourselves and connect in a deeper way with other people — to understand their experiences, to get where they're coming from, to feel what they feel. Widespread empathy scales that intuition from the individual to the organization.

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.

“We were committed from the start to wanting to do all we could to support these communities in their work, and that meant we had to figure out a way to maintain a close connection to what was happening on the ground.”
– Carmen Siberon, William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund

Grantmakers can institute practices that integrate empathy into every part of our work – from due diligence to sun setting grant awards. Here are some examples that illustrate how a high-empathy grantmaker may behave:

- Staff and board members serve on volunteer boards for grantee nonprofits, or serve on community committees and civic organizations.
- When going to site visits, foundation staff take care to conform to grantee organization's dress code.
- After collecting grantee feedback that showed that applications and reporting forms were cumbersome and the procedure unclear, the grantmakers revise and streamline applications and processes in order to make sure that only the most critical information is requested and publically publish and adhere to a clear and short timeline for the response and selection process.

The Benefits of Empathy

When grantmakers operate in systematic ways that ensure our staff and board practice empathy, there are positive outcomes for our organizations and the people we serve. Some common benefits of widespread empathy include:

- **Change occurs more quickly.** Bureaucracies melt away as staff members don't rely solely on paperwork to understand community problems or to make funding decisions.

The result: Grantmakers are able to respond in real time to developments we see and hear about on the ground.

- **Innovative solutions take hold.** Staff and board members are more in tune with the best ideas outside our organizations.

The result: Grantmakers call into question established but potentially outdated programs and strategies and explore promising new approaches put forth by the community and other stakeholders.

- **Philanthropy is more efficient and effective.** Lengthy grant review cycles shorten and more, better projects get funded.

The result: Grantmakers can focus on addressing the most urgent needs of grantees and communities by supporting community-driven solutions in a timely way.

- **Nonprofits are stronger.** Local organizations get the kind of support they need to create lasting change in the communities they serve.

The result: Grantmakers have to spend less time turning operationally challenged community groups into robust applicants.

Assessing Your Level of Empathy

As you consider what level of empathy your organization practices, here are some questions to guide your discussion:

- What is the status of your organization's relationships with grantees and community leaders — and how do you know? What do you do to ensure that you understand how stakeholders view their relationships with your organization?
- What firsthand experience does your foundation's staff members have with the community and organizations they serve?
- About how much time do staff members spend in the field?
- Does your organization have standards or expectations in place to help guide program staff members in their ongoing communications and contact with grantees? Do you provide staff with training in relationship building and related topics?

- What can your organization do to encourage staff members to bring a higher level of humility to their work with grantees and others?
- What opportunities are available for community members and nonprofit representatives to connect with people from your foundation? Does your organization actively create opportunities for initiating and strengthening connections between staff and the people they serve?
- Do your organization's program officers and other staff have regular opportunities to discuss what's happening with your grantees and collect feedback on how to strengthen your grantmaking to help address urgent needs?
- To what extent can your organization provide grantees with various forms of support (e.g., for capacity building, leadership development) based on staff members' understanding of what grantees need?
- To what extent are board members involved in the communities that are the focus of your organization's work — as volunteers and nonprofit board members?
- To what extent have grantees, community leaders or nonprofit representatives been able to comment on application processes and deadlines, program requirements and other aspects of how the foundation works?
- What top two investments could your organization make to ensure that staff and board can develop and sustain a strong, firsthand understanding of grantee and community needs?

Conclusion

Because of organizational cultures and the confines of our jobs, we tend to place processes and procedure ahead of empathy and intuition. We tend to develop systems 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 takes time. It requires a specific mindset that values and prioritizes deeper connections with grantees and others as well as the implementation of practices aimed at building and sustaining deep connections with others.

Empathy starts with people — people who can develop a gut-level understanding of and connection to those whom they work with and serve. For grantmaking organizations, however, fostering empathy is about more than just assembling a group of program officers and other team members who can reach outside themselves and connect with others. It's about creating an organizational culture where everyone can have a firsthand sense of what's happening on the ground in the communities where the grantmaker does its work, and of what grantees and other nonprofits truly need to be effective.