

What Mindset is Needed to Support Collaboration?

Throughout history, social change has been possible only through the contributions and dedication of many people and organizations connected in tight and loose groups. Recognizing that operating within the confines of a single organization is often insufficient to create widespread, lasting change, grantmakers are adopting a different mindset that helps them see and do their work as part of larger, more diverse and powerful efforts. However, this mindset is different from how some foundations currently operate. It means valuing connectedness, shared ownership and openness. This piece introduces how we might shift from a traditional mindset to a more collaborative mindset, to think and act beyond the boundaries of our foundations to make progress on complex social problems.

Introduction

Building an effective organization is an important part of most efforts to grow impact. However, more and more practitioners understand that large-scale impact requires us to work in decentralized ways with numerous partners. This approach recognizes the interdependence of the people and organizations working on social change. To do this, though, requires a shift in mindset — taking a stance that prioritizes openness, transparency, relationship building and distributed decision-making.

For more on this topic, see [Catalyzing Networks for Social Change: A Funder's Guide](#) (Washington, D.C.: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and Monitor Institute, 2011), [Cracking the Network Code: Four Principles for Grantmakers](#) (Washington, D.C.: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2013) and [Many Hands, More Impact: Philanthropy's Role in Supporting Movements](#), (Washington, D.C.: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2013).

“Mastering collaboration is the most important opportunity to close the gap between achieving pretty good performance and full potential.” — Nonprofit leader¹

What does it mean to work with a collaborative mindset?

Developments such as the 911 emergency response system,² widespread access to immunizations in poor countries³ or the civil rights movement in the United States couldn't have happened through solitary or isolated leadership. Rather, citizens, philanthropists and groups of all kinds were linking actions through constantly changing constellations of relationships. Working with a collaborative mindset allows us to exercise leadership that values connectedness, shared ownership and openness. For grantmakers, in particular, this means the following:

Operating with an awareness of the webs of relationship you are embedded in. It also means cultivating these relationships to achieve the impact you care about.

According to Janet Shing, [The Community Foundation for Monterey County \(California\)](#) is doing this by “convening diverse interests around issues of common concern.” It’s coordinating a network of social service providers; helping government, nonprofit and school leaders better align their efforts; and building relationships among leaders at the neighborhood level. Across these initiatives, CFMC is actively applying insights from social network theory, mapping networks and engaging local leaders in opportunities to learn about network dynamics and community change.

Finding where the conversations are happening and taking part in them — exercising leadership through active participation.

When the [Henry P. Kendall Foundation](#) decided to launch a new grantmaking program to focus on the issue of creating a resilient food system in New England, Senior Program Officer Courtney Bourns started by learning what was already happening and what was most needed to advance progress in

¹ Jane Wei-Skillern, Nora Silver and Eric Heitz, *Cracking the Network Code: Four Principles for Grantmakers* (Washington, D.C.: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2013), 9.

² Joel L. Fleishman, *The Foundation: A Great American Secret* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007), 5.

³ Mary Robinson, “GAVI Alliance Progress Report,” Gavi Alliance, 2010.

the field. During this process, she came across a regional group of academics and practitioners at the University of New Hampshire who were already imagining how they would build a network to advance an ambitious vision and collaboration toward a healthy, regional food system. Recognizing the importance of such a network, the Kendall Foundation made a grant to the university to kick-start the developing network, rather than building something new. The foundation also pointed the network leaders to other resources they sought, such as facilitation, process design and potential network contacts. In addition, the Kendall Foundation helped to mobilize more funding for the network by inviting other foundation peers to join the network design team and provide funding for needed elements of the new network, such as evaluation.

Acting transparently by sharing — with internal colleagues and with partners beyond your own walls — what you're doing and learning along the way, not just in a final report packaged for public consumption.

In 2011, [Living Cities](#) launched a blog, providing a space for every staff member to take an active role in sharing firsthand what they were learning, what assumptions were being challenged and what questions were emerging for them that they didn't know the answers to — all in real time. Initially, uptake was slow because sharing ideas and insights before they are fully evaluated and proven goes against most professional training. However, as Living Cities' internal culture began to support trust and empowered staff to embed reflection into every day work, the number of annual posts increased tenfold in just one year. Staff began to see the value behind open knowledge sharing and how it can be incredibly helpful in crowd sourcing ideas and connecting leaders working on similar problems.

“If we created a culture where we were completely open with one another about what was working and what was not working — we could accelerate the pace at which social change happens and find solutions which have meaningful impact much more quickly.”

— Alison Gold, assistant director of knowledge & impact, Living Cities

Balancing a Traditional and a Network Mindset

The chart below outlines opportunities to experiment with shifting from a traditional mindset to a collaborative, networked mindset. The chart describes the extremes; there is a range of possibilities in between. We're not suggesting this mindset is always the answer. There are plenty of situations in which, for example, centrally coordinated solutions and individual expertise

may be the way to achieve the best results. The art is in figuring out what's appropriate for your situation and challenging yourself to share control and experiment with more flexible ways of operating.

Traditional Mindset

- Firmly controlled and planned
- Strengthening individual efforts
- Procuring deliverables (e.g., programs)
- Proprietary information and learning
- Decision making concentrated
- Insight from individual, expert actors
- Effectiveness linked to concrete outputs (e.g., a policy win, a measurable increase in community prosperity)

Network Mindset

- Loosely controlled and emergent
- Weaving connections and building networks
- Stimulating activity (e.g., platforms)
- Open information and learning
- Decision-making shared
- Collective intelligence
- Effectiveness also linked to intangibles (e.g., trusting relationships, information flows)

What will it take to shift to a more collaborative mindset?

Making this shift may not mean dramatic change to our grantmaking operations. It's mostly about developing a mindset that prioritizes relationships and embraces the complexity of the networks and the systems in which they're embedded — then applying that mindset to the ways in which grants are structured, impact is assessed and leadership is exercised. Four principles to keep in mind include:

Focus on mission, not organization

- Collaborative leaders primarily pursue leveraged impact via networks rather than through their own organizations' growth. They routinely invest in others without expectation of direct institutional gain.
- Hire staff that put the overarching mission or cause first, ahead of individual organizations, agendas or egos.
- Be open to following, rather than always leading. Coordinate and collaborate with other funders and pool your collective resources and leadership.
- Reward organizations that focus outward, favoring network wide mission results over individual organization wins.

Exercise trust, not control

- Build deep and responsive relationships with grantees, creating a safe space where grantees can have more authentic conversations. Dedicate the appropriate amount of time and attention to understanding the skills and capacities of grantees, community members, other grantmakers and partners.
- Allow time for, but don't force, your grantees to develop relationships with potential collaborators, and make sure your foundation's policies and practices do not heighten feelings of comparison or competitiveness among these groups.
- Demonstrate your commitment to the cause by playing a supporting role to grantees. Pay for the administrative costs of their collaborations and consider how you can attract more donors and resources to the field to benefit grantees, even if there is no direct institutional to your foundation itself.

Lead with humility, not brand

- Offer patience, expertise, connections or other resources without expectation of recognition or payback.
- Seek external input and aim to understand the perspective of grantees and other funders. Then, be willing to let go of long-held beliefs and activities in response to learning from these peers.
- Share (or even redirect) credit among collaborators.

Think like a node, not a hub

- Acknowledge the power imbalance that having money creates between grantmakers and grantees. Be mindful of the power you can, albeit unintentionally, wield.
- Explore the ecosystem in which we operate and fund. Learn what others are doing in the field and understand how they might relate to one another. Make connections among players who have complementary goals but might not have found each other otherwise.
- Do more by doing less — listen to and learn about what nonprofits need, and allow them to take the lead rather than playing a heavy-handed role in shaping the collaboration. Facilitate processes rather than be the central conduit through which all things happen.

What makes this mindset transition challenging?

Working transparently and sharing leadership isn't always easy. Because this mindset can run contrary to common grantmaking practice, some basic grantmaking structures and mechanics — such as siloed program areas and static application requirements — inhibit working this way. There are many open questions about how working with a collaborative mindset will mesh with current ways of doing business. Some of the most common include:

- **Lack of time:** I'm already overloaded. How can I possibly find the time to make connections?
- **Communications protocol:** My organization has a clear set of guidelines for how we talk about our work and set expectations. I need to comply.
- **Privacy:** I've tried hard to create relationships based on trust. I don't want to violate confidentiality by getting too caught up in the transparency trend.
- **Misuse of information:** What if information my foundation openly shares is misrepresented? Will it reflect poorly on the organization, grantees or me?
- **Accuracy and high-quality results:** What if crowdsourcing generates a wrong answer? If I pose an open question, do I have to act on the responses?
- **Accountability:** If leadership is distributed, what if no one steps up to make sure the work is getting down and to own the results?

Conclusion

In the end, this is all about connecting actors and resources in order to create greater impact than an individual or organization can achieve on its own. By embracing a new way of thinking and working that is rooted in shared understanding and oriented toward interdependence and engagement, we can more effectively use collaborative action to make progress on complex problems. This means grantmakers need to practice humility, think more like a node, put the mission first and exercise trust with their partners and key stakeholders.