

GEO Member Story



How Unbound Philanthropy continuously learns and improves by partnering with grantees to collect and share greater insights.

Grantmakers who want to continuously learn and improve are more successful when they partner with grantees to collect information and authentically share what is or is not working and why. This approach means engaging staff, grantees, and community members in shaping evaluation and learning efforts, including developing the evaluation outcomes and indicators that will inform key decisions. Unbound Philanthropy, a private foundation formed in 2003, evolved its grantmaking strategy iteratively and with an open mind, listening carefully to grantees to better understand how it could most effectively achieve its mission. The insights the foundation developed were only possible because it has approached learning alongside its grantees and the communities it serves. As part of this effort, Unbound Philanthropy implements a monitoring, evaluation, and learning (ME&L) framework to guide how it tracks progress toward its strategic priorities. This framework also supports ongoing learning throughout the strategy implementation process.

Unbound Philanthropy works to transform the long-standing barriers to the human rights of migrants and refugees. The foundation seeks to strengthen social, civic, and economic opportunities for immigrants as well as foster relationships of mutual responsibility and respect in the US and UK. In order to achieve these big goals, the foundation provides support to grantees working to make systemic or large-scale change, as well as to smaller grassroots, immigrant-led organizations that form the base of the movement. Because of its single-issue focus, Unbound Philanthropy has developed long-term, ongoing relationships with organizations in its fields, with whom it partners to stay closely attuned to changes in the landscape and to determine where it can most effectively fill gaps.

Unbound Philanthropy made its first exploratory grants between 2004 and 2008, before establishing its first strategic plan for 2014 – 18. This was a period of learning for the foundation, both about the change it aims to affect and how the foundation will pursue its work. The strategic plan provided clarity to focus Unbound Philanthropy’s time and funding, with sufficient flexibility to respond to the continually changing external environment; moreover, the plan laid the foundation for the development of Unbound Philanthropy’s ME&L framework, including the articulation of its “Theory of Philanthropy.” Developed in partnership with evaluation consultants Learning for Action, this guiding approach comprises a number of key concepts, including high staff and board engagement, risk tolerance, a strong orientation toward learning, a commitment to hiring staff with in-depth subject matter expertise and a primary focus on giving flexible core operating grants, particularly in its US program. Taryn Higashi, executive director of Unbound Philanthropy, says “Having articulated our ‘Theory of Philanthropy’ has really been the critical component for clarifying our approach to change-making, as well as for using evaluation and learning to continually inform our work. It has helped us make strategic decisions, and then reflect on and learn from those

decisions.” Precisely because its strategic approach set such ambitious and specific goals, Unbound Philanthropy couldn’t go at it alone in its evaluation and learning efforts. The insights generated in partnership with its grantees and the communities it serves have been critical for understanding how the foundation has been able to achieve its goals. For example, the foundation recently directly worked with and supported a grantee, United We Dream Network, to help uncover the impact of its practices and approach. UWDN, a national network of immigrant youth working to build a movement for greater social justice, was instrumental in surfacing key insights on how Unbound Philanthropy has helped to accelerate the pace of change for both UWDN and the larger field in achieving policy goals.

Unbound Philanthropy’s commitment to providing flexible core operating grants is another example of how the foundation has learned from grantees how it can most effectively achieve long-term goals in a rapidly changing landscape. Some grantmakers face internal pressure to avoid these types of grants because traditional evaluation practices struggle to provide usable metrics. However, Steven LaFrance, Founder and CEO of Learning for Action and Unbound Philanthropy’s evaluation and learning partner, makes the argument that learning from these grants just requires a shift in how we approach evaluation. “It is immensely valuable when funders provide general operating support, and that they formulate the objectives to be achieved *in deep partnership and through ongoing dialogue* with grantee partners to learn the most about what’s working and what could be adjusted over time to better achieve outcomes,” said LaFrance.

For Unbound Philanthropy, employing this monitoring, evaluation & learning framework has allowed it to codify an approach to learning with others that was already deeply ingrained at the organization. “We didn’t know exactly what it would look like or what it would take to implement, but we knew we were committed to being a learning organization,” says Higashi. With grantees spanning the spectrum from large national organizations to smaller grassroots organizations, strong relationships have been fundamental to Unbound Philanthropy’s success in ensuring that its learning practices are not overly burdensome and will help all involved learn and improve. “[Our grantees] do and lead the work. They are the actors and the drivers and I think our staff is very attuned to their capacity and the way that they work,” says Higashi.

To find out more information on Unbound Philanthropy, please visit <https://www.unboundphilanthropy.org/>

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