

Organizer's Edge ▶

Greetings!

By Michael Jacoby Brown

Foundations are Hurting Us

Many foundations espouse the goals of social justice, racial diversity, equity and inclusion, and funding organizational effectiveness. Their methods and behavior, however, are undercutting these goals.



Creating Harmful Competition

Most foundations have a complex, competitive system for proposals and reporting to access funding. This results in competition among community groups, disunity, and bad feeling. Just one example among many: two local groups in a low income neighborhood resenting each other after competing for the same \$20,000 grant. Instead of cooperating to help the local community, the foundation created animosity and poisoned opportunities for cooperation

Rewarding Writing Skills

Foundations privilege proposal writing skills over organizing. For example a foundation promised a grant to a progressive group of people of color. The program office told the director to hand in a proposal and the money was theirs. She sent in the proposal. Then the board wanted a new proposal, a more detailed budget, and answers to many other questions. The group's director was livid. I assume the intent of the foundation board was to practice due diligence. The group's director experienced this change as racist and lying. It created more work for the group, stymied its effectiveness and fostered racism - - probably not the impact the foundation intended.

Proposals and Reports Don't Insure Effectiveness

An organization I led received a \$50,000 grant from a foundation that required proposals and reports. We also got a \$50,000 annual investment from an individual with no written proposal. Our "report" was a dinner with him once a year. There was no difference in how well we spent the money. The dinner meeting taught the funder more than a written report, cemented a long term relationship and led to access to other funders.

Not Respecting People of Color

A foundation asked all its grantees in a region to attend a meeting. These groups organized low-income people of color and the staff and directors at this meeting were also largely people of color. The foundation sent a group of white consultants with no experience with the region to run the meeting, including several break out groups.

The community groups' staff and directors were competent organizers. (Many had advanced degrees from Ivy League universities, if that impresses you) They certainly could stand in front of a flip chart and chair a meeting.

The *intent* of the Foundation was likely to facilitate a good meeting and foster cooperation among their grantees. The *impact* was very different. Many staff members experienced this as racist and insulting, not to mention a huge waste of money.- money that could have helped the local groups rather than the out-of-town, white consultants. The foundation's actions increased the groups' distrust of the foundation, increased the competitiveness among them, wasted their time in an ineffective meeting and fostered racism. The foundation's *intent* had a very different *impact*.

People of color would likely have many more examples and direct experience of disrespect. As a white person, I can only describe what I observed and heard. The good intentions did not negate the racist impact. (For more on "intent and impact" – especially across race and other differences, see VISIONS-INC.org)

The Way Forward

- **Do not require proposals and reports.** Excellence in proposal writing has little correlation to a social justice group's effectiveness.
- **Fund the social justice groups for 20 years,** (unless they really screw up or abscond with the money) so they know their funding is secure and can plan. Create an ironclad contract so a change in foundation directors cannot abrogate the 20 year commitment.
- **When funding in communities of color or any community other than your own,** respect the intelligence, skill, and expert knowledge of those closest to the problems. They know what works.

Conclusion

Changing foundation systems and behavior won't be easy. The topics mentioned above are "undiscussable," ([Chris Argyris](#)' term) and the fact that they are undiscussable is undiscussable! With guaranteed long-term funding and no need to review complex proposals and reports, foundation staffing might change. Foundations that support equity, diversity and inclusion and espouse organizational effectiveness will have to learn how to recognize, understand and appreciate the competence of the people of color who run their own grassroots community groups. This journey will not be quick or easy, especially if it remains undiscussable. And it takes longer if we don't get started.

-**Michael Jacoby Brown** has spent over four decades as a social justice community organizer and non-profit director. and is a consultant for VISIONS-INC

Feedback Welcome

We want to hear from you, your reactions, ideas, what is at the edge YOUR "envelope." Just go to...

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Who else you will hear from.....

We are just starting, but so far you can expect to hear what the following people are thinking:

Jessica Tang: Boston Teachers Union, AFT

George Luse of the Mass Teachers Assn,

Scott Reed with the PICO Network, ,

Cathy Howell, in Oregon and El Salvador, formerly with the AFL-CIO,

Caesar McDowell of the Interaction Institute for Social Justice,

Diana Bell of Community and Labor United,

David Hernandez of the California Education Assn,

Attica Scott, State Rep Louisville, Kentucky

Walter Davis, of the Tennessee, Health Care Coalition.

Debra Askenase, of Community Organizing 2.0,

Deb Fastino, of the Coalition for Social Justice in New Bedford, MA,

Rebecca Gutman, with SEIU-1199,

Tim Dean, of SEIU-1199,

Mary Ochs, long time organizer in Los Angeles

and others, hopefully, including YOU

Other Useful Links

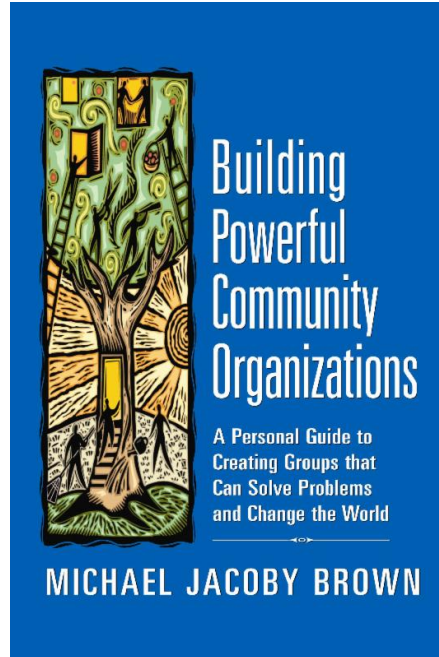
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