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Don't Be a Wimp: Why a New Foundation CEO Wants to Be the 'Influence Lady'

By Judy Belk

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After more than a year as leader of the California Wellness Foundation, a nearly-billion-dollar philanthropy focused on getting resources to the state's most vulnerable people, I've learned several lessons, both big and small, about money, power, leading with courage, and even how to lose weight without dieting.

Here's what I've learned:

\$35 million isn't so much. Before I took this job, I thought that \$35 million was a lot of money. Think about it: It's enough to hand \$1 to nearly every Californian. But it only goes so far. Every year, California Wellness gives out almost \$35 million across the state. Still, we have to say no to the majority of folks who approach us for support.

That's a tough reality for someone like me who always likes to say yes, and that's especially true when I hear about innovative ideas that could improve the lives of many who are struggling to stay healthy and well.

So I find myself embracing one of those terms I think is overused in philanthropy: leverage. We're exploring ways to stretch out our foundation's investments to serve more people. We're also looking for ways to achieve greater impact by keeping the pressure on government at all levels to fulfill its role in serving everyone. Government has the infrastructure and budgets that can bring the benefits of innovative policies

and programs to everyone (think about the impact of the Affordable Care Act) faster and more efficiently than all of our nation's combined philanthropic dollars.

Zip codes matter. It doesn't take long to notice that the Golden State isn't so golden for far too many Californians whose quality of life is often dictated by their zip codes. Factors such as home town, race, immigration status, and income prevent too many Californians from getting access to what they need to live healthy lives. Even life expectancy is influenced by where someone in the state lives. A recent report from Measure of America tells us that a resident of the posh Newport Beach-Laguna Hills area might enjoy living to the age of 88, while just a few miles up the freeway, in the underserved South Los Angeles-Watts area, the average life span is 73 years.

And those who are sick, poor, and undocumented have less of a chance to get the health care they need than if they lived in the counties of Sacramento, Fresno, or Orange, where local politics dictate the doling out of health care based on immigration status rather than on compassion and common sense.

I've become a brilliant, skinny, thought leader. Sounds impressive, right? I hear some version of this almost every day as fundraisers, consultants, job seekers, and others remark about my sudden brilliance or weight loss since taking this job. As one nonprofit leader jokingly said, "I have no shame when it comes to advocating for money where the need is great and the dollars few."

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There's a lot of flattery that comes your way when you're in a position of power, influence, and money. If I let it, it could change me in ways that wouldn't be good for me or my work. But if I use that influence wisely, I could marshal it to open closed doors, shine a spotlight on unmet needs, and speak out on issues that might otherwise go unheard.

I also realize I need to stay grounded and get out of my corner office to connect with the beneficiaries of our work. I was reminded of that a few weeks ago when I attended a community forum in Oakland to solicit feedback on how the foundation might better serve the needs of women who are trying to regain a solid footing in society after years of incarceration. During a break, one of the women came up to me and said, "Who exactly are you? Everyone in the room seems to be falling all over themselves to get to you." When I told her what I did, she paused and smiled. "Oh, I get it. You're the money lady."

She put a fine point on it, and she's right: My job is to oversee how we spend our funds. But I prefer to think of myself as the influence lady, who's less concerned about being smart and skinny and more concerned about creating meaningful, lasting change.

You can't lead if no one's following. In the hierarchy of philanthropy, foundations are often placed at the top of the food chain.

That's because we control the money. But the fact is, that unless we have a robust nonprofit sector rich with solid ideas, smart leaders, and strong organizations to support, foundations are just institutions with a lot of money. We can't do much without the committed, talented nonprofit leaders who are advocating, providing services, and empowering communities.

We need to make their jobs easier by doing our jobs faster and more efficiently, providing more support for operating expenses, getting the money out the door sooner, and halting requests for more paperwork than we can read or more outcomes than we are prepared to fund. The bottom line: We need to lead by becoming role models of the kind of behavior we know will help organizations be more effective. At California Wellness, we aim to do just that.

We all must treat the organizations we fund as our partners, and we must strive for a model of shared leadership in attacking the problems we all desire to solve.

Don't be a wimp. That's a note to self: part lesson and part reminder. If I can't lead with courage in this job, then I'm a true wimp.

Every day, my job is to get up and think about how I can get \$35 million out the door to individuals and communities in need. I have the good fortune of reporting to a supportive board. I don't have to worry about impatient shareholders who might sell my stock, angry voters who will kick me out of office, or losing sleep over how I'm going to make payroll. I'm well aware that I'm in a privileged place. I need to get more comfortable with fearlessly speaking out and acting on principles of justice and equity and doing the right thing — even if I'm standing alone or ruffle a few feathers.

California Wellness provides me with a great platform to overcome my “wimpyness.” I've inherited a foundation that has a strong legacy of taking on some of the most contentious issues of our times, all focused on our mission of advancing health and

wellness for the underserved. We believe that access to health care is a human right, regardless of immigration status or economic level. We embrace the solid research affirming that violence, especially gun violence, is indeed a public-health issue. We know, and are working to address, the fact that a family's race and zip code often determine whether they have access to a grocery store or a park, or will make it to an 80th birthday. And I will not be wimpy about telling these stories and working to rewrite them.

It's been a great year of learning. I have a dream job. But lest I start getting a big head and thinking I'm all that, there's always my younger brother who keeps me firmly grounded. He has teased me for most of my life and never hesitates to remind me of the view from outside of my bubble. "So let me get this right. They pay you to give away other people's money? That's a real job, huh? Yeah, right. Sounds a little illegal to me."

Thank God for the little brother reminding me that I might be the money lady, but I need to keep it real. I'm striving to do just that, in a fearless and non-wimpy way, as California Wellness takes its next steps toward making all Californians healthy.

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