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Impatience Can Be a Virtue, Too: Rethinking the “How” of Philanthropy

By Judy Belk

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This post from Judy Belk, president and CEO of The California Wellness Foundation, is the third in a series of eight essays from foundation CEOs reflecting on findings from the CEP research report, [The Future of Foundation Philanthropy: The CEO Perspective](#), commissioned by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in conjunction with its 50th anniversary.

As I reviewed *The Future of Foundation Philanthropy*, I recalled my initial impressions 16 years ago when I had the opportunity to work for the first time on the “inside” of a large private foundation similar to those highlighted in the report. I was a seasoned grantmaker, but up until then my experience had been in the corporate sector, most recently as head of the Levi Strauss Foundation.

I was drawn to the private foundation’s mission, its track record, and its reputation of hiring smart, committed folks. It was a top-notch operation. But the one-year job — I was a senior advisor on the launch of a new initiative — also proved to be a major cultural shift for me. And it wasn’t just that I couldn’t wear my Levi’s to work anymore.

Ironically, the culture of this foundation felt more “corporate” than the actual corporate environment where I had worked and thrived. The hallways were quieter, the vibe was cautious and a bit stifled, and compared to my corporate experience, there was less urgency to move on good ideas (of which there was no shortage). The only times the pace really picked up were when staff embarked on the frenzied push to get the quarterly board book out the door. After my one-year assignment was over, I came away with two big “ahas.”

First, I had a deeper respect for the “what” of philanthropy. The experience reaffirmed for me that this could be my life’s work. But I also left the experience frustrated about the “how” of philanthropy.

The skills that served me so well in the private sector — an impatience for unnecessary process, a bias for action and informed risk-taking, and a notorious big mouth known for questioning decisions by those in charge — seemed out of sync in this environment. I left believing that if I was going to be successful at a large foundation, I had to be prepared to conform — or else I had to run the place.

Fast forward to 2014, and I got my wish. I was given the privilege of “running” a fabulous place when I was named president and CEO of The California Wellness Foundation. When I arrived at Cal Wellness, I saw many of the same assets I noticed a decade before: an amazing legacy of work; a supportive board; a committed and smart team of professionals; and a laser-sharp mission focused on equity, advocacy, and access.

But I also experienced some of the same culture challenges that keep large private foundations from being and doing their best. That’s why this report struck a chord. Given my now 25 years in organized philanthropy, the report raised four key issues for me:

1. TIME IS OUR BIGGEST GIFT.

Time in philanthropy can be a double-edged sword. 🐦 When used wisely, it is a gift and a strategic tool. It offers us the opportunity to delve deep on an

emerging issue, stick with our convictions even when others have moved on to the next fad, or stop and listen to the people and communities we serve instead of imposing our grand ideas from above.

But time in philanthropy is often squandered or misused. Because we have the power and the luxury to take our sweet time making decisions or waiting to see if our work will take hold, we often take time for granted. What's more, we often hide behind time simply because we can.

Well, it's time to think a little differently. We need to look at our internal processes to shorten everything from board book prep to how long it takes to get checks out the door. And if fear of failure or falling short is preventing us from acting more swiftly on promising new ideas, let's figure out how to create cultures where people can experiment and even (gasp!) take a few risks.

2. VALUING DIVERSITY AND EQUITY ISN'T ENOUGH.

As a woman of color, I was heartened to see my fellow foundation CEOs recognize that diversity (or the lack of it) in our sector is a critical issue. But it's not enough to wring our hands about diversity; let's make it happen. 🐦 Imagine a foundation with a staff and board that reflect the communities it serves and where equity is a key driver when it comes to grantmaking and internal processes. That's a place where the CEO has made diversity, inclusion, and equity major priorities.

The **latest data** from the D5 coalition show that just eight percent of foundation CEOs are people of color — a worse track record than the private sector! The numbers for senior staff and program officers are a little better, but nothing to write home about. And even though there are more women than ever in the sector, statistics show that the larger a foundation's endowment, the harder it is for women to break through to the CEO ranks no matter how hard we lean in.

Of course, making a commitment to diversity and equity is about more than who is on our staff teams. It also means getting more resources to

communities of color, paying more attention to how we manage and invest our endowments, and bringing more diversity to our boards. I was thrilled two years ago when I walked into the Cal Wellness board room for my first interview and saw an amazingly diverse group of trustees (a majority were women and people of color). It was an unusual experience, even in an amazingly diverse state like California. It shouldn't be.

3. LET'S THINK OUTSIDE THE BUBBLE.

Reading the CEP report reminds me how valuable and important it is to hear from my colleagues about the issues and the challenges our foundations face. But we also need to hear from other voices across the philanthropic sector.

Truth is, large private foundations sometimes operate in an unintentional, self-imposed bubble. If I'm not careful, I can go from one meeting to another only interacting with other foundation CEOs, or with the leaders of large nonprofits that we all support. Let's cast a wider net for partners, allies, and resources.

That means reaching out to individual donors, including the growing ranks of socially committed donors in communities of color. It also means reaching out to corporate foundations and family foundations, a growing segment of the sector.

And it means reaching beyond philanthropy, too. There are a lot of smart, talented people and institutions who don't really understand who we are and what we do as large private foundations. Let's bring more people to the table — and let's invite ourselves to their tables, too — so that they can learn what we're about and how we might work together.

4. WE ALL HAVE VOICES, LET'S USE THEM.

I agree with my colleagues that advocacy, communication, and convening are three powerful tools in our toolkit. I also agree that foundations have an uneven track record in embracing and using these tools effectively.

Twenty million people have gained healthcare coverage because of the Affordable Care Act. Foundations like Cal Wellness have invested heavily for years in providing access to healthcare, but only government had the resources and the infrastructure — and I might add, the responsibility — to make a difference on that scale. It just shows that foundations need to invest more in advocacy and in lifting up people's voices for public policy changes on the issues at the heart of our missions, whether it's education, criminal justice reform, environmental justice, or support for the arts. 🐦

And let's lift our foundations' voices, too. Social media, video, op-eds, podcasts, blogging, strategic convening — we have an incredible range of platforms through which we can share ideas and stories to help drive change. Communicate, communicate, communicate!

Now, I don't want to give the impression that Cal Wellness has "solved" any of the issues I've highlighted — we haven't. One big lesson that Ms. Big Mouth (that would be me) has learned over the past two-and-a-half years is that complaining about foundation culture is a lot easier than changing it. But change we must.

Kudos to CEP for lifting up the voices of CEOs on these issues.

And, on behalf of the entire Cal Wellness family, we wish our colleagues at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation 50 more years of outstanding philanthropic leadership.

We're hopeful that in 2066, when Hewlett celebrates its centennial, those leaders who follow us will look back and see this as a moment when philanthropy made the most of the biggest gift we have: time. Because now is the time to show, once and for all, how philanthropy can help change the world. We need to act urgently, make diversity and equity the norm, invite new allies to the table, and raise our voices on behalf of those who too often go unheard.

This blog post is one of eight reflections from foundation CEOs to the CEP research report, [The Future of Foundation Philanthropy: The CEO Perspective](#). Download the entire collection of CEO reflections [here](#).

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