

Overcoming the Four Common Challenges to Incorporating Participatory Grantmaking

For much of philanthropy's history, grantees and people outside the foundation's walls often only had one seat: on the sidelines.

Perhaps a major reason for so little participation in philanthropy is because it's not easy. It can be challenging to incorporate diverse opinions. It can be challenging to try new processes. And it can be challenging for those in leadership to give up power.

But today's grantmakers know that to drive real impact—the primary reason foundations and other grantmaking organizations exist—you need to engage directly with your community. Participation is one way of doing this. It goes beyond people outside of the foundation simply being informed. It means they become involved in the decision-making process.

Participatory grantmaking results in stronger relationships with community members and more impactful grant decisions, but overcoming the challenges may take time and a mindset change for your foundation. Here are four common roadblocks grantmakers face when increasing participation in their grantmaking processes, as well as suggestions on how you and your team can overcome them.

“Participatory grantmaking is all about the process, the iteration, and the learning—for all involved.”

—Diana Samarasan and Katy Love,
independent philanthropy consultants

To learn more about participatory grantmaking, check out these resources:

Webinar [What's all the Fuss About Participatory Grantmaking | Making Sense of This Evolving Practice](#)

Blog Post: [Grantmaking: What's Participation Got to Do with It?](#)

Blog Post: [Participatory Grantmaking: I'm in. Now What?](#)

1. Making the Mindshift to Give Up Power

Ceding the ability to make the final decision to those outside the foundation is often the hardest part of incorporating participatory grantmaking into your processes, but it allows for more context within your grant decisions. One way to lose credibility with your community is to ask them to make a decision and then overrule that decision.

How to address this challenge: First, make sure your leadership and Board understand the goals of participatory grantmaking and the value that it will bring to you and your communities. Second, have existing decision-makers help outline the new processes so they have insight into how decisions will be made. And lastly, know that you don't have to go all-in right away. Move one grant program into a participatory model to understand how it will work and possibly scale.

2. Getting Leadership on Board

Participatory grantmaking can require a significant mindset shift for your leadership, but if they are already looking for ways to do their grantmaking processes differently, it can be an exciting next step. Participatory grantmaking can help organizations be more innovative by building trust with the community, lead to more impactful grant programs, and create more equitable outcomes.

How to address this challenge: First, understand what is important to your leadership team. Your participatory grantmaking champion can help connect the dots between this model and the organization's larger goals. As your champion leading the shift to participatory grantmaking gathers information, be clear about how this move will help the organization achieve those goals. Second, have your leadership provide input at the beginning and be open and transparent through the process, with the clear understanding that the final decision of the reviewers will stand.

“What these models all have in common is inviting people impacted by funding into the grantmaking process and shifting the power of decision-making to them. This means that staff—as well as those with wealth—move back to listen and implement the ideas and knowledge brought into the room by these participants.”

—Diana Samarasan and Katy Love,
independent philanthropy consultants



3. Choosing Participants

The main idea behind participatory grantmaking is to bring decision-making power to the community you serve. But how do you make sure that the people you invite to make decisions reflect or represent the community you want to serve? If you invite participants from organizations that your foundation has funded in the past, you may be missing new or untapped parts of your community.

How to address this challenge: Be clear about your community and if there is a subsection that you want to reach with this specific effort. On its website, the Maine Initiatives organization clearly outlines the priorities for its participatory grantmaking program, who their ‘community’ is, and why community input matters to them. When the Conant Family Foundation leadership started planning their participatory grantmaking approach, they worked closely with three local nonprofit organizations to nominate reviewers to participate. To keep a fresh perspective—and avoid overburdening participants—consider a regular rotation. Even while offering non-funder participants a stipend to participate, the review process and training can be time-consuming for those embedded in philanthropy. Most importantly, make sure your participants reflect the community, but don’t expect them to represent their entire community.

OTHER ORGANIZATIONS USING PARTICIPATORY GRANTMAKING

[Diverse City Fund](#)

[Maine Initiatives](#)

[Solutions Project](#)

[Borealis’ Disability Inclusion Fund](#)

[Arctic Indigenous Fund](#)

[Fund for Global Human Rights](#)

[Red Umbrella Fund](#)

[The Conant Family Foundation](#)



4. Finding the Time and Resources

New processes always take time. They take time to plan, and they take time to implement. When you are a lean funder, it can be difficult to find the time for these new processes. One of the benefits of participatory grantmaking is that you are bringing your community in to help with some of the tasks, but this will require training and additional work for your staff.

How to address this challenge: Look at the roles and job descriptions of your staff and see if any of their skills are relevant for this new model; for example, transitioning someone who would normally review grants to be a facilitator (they can be trained for this) or a process manager. Many grantmakers who are already using participatory grantmaking can share their resources, so you aren't starting from scratch. The Conant Family Foundation, for example, shares the rubric they ask their reviewers to use, which might be a good starting point for yours.

Don't Rush the Process

Foundations—and the communities they support—can benefit greatly from incorporating participatory grantmaking principles. But not all organizations are ready to make the shift. When the risk might be too high or the burden of creating a truly equitable experience for participants is too onerous, take a step back to gather information, learn by funding intermediaries that use participatory grantmaking, and embrace iteration.

To learn more about participatory grantmaking, watch our webinar with experts Diana Samarasan and Katy Love, [“What’s All the Fuss About Participatory Grantmaking? Making Sense of This Evolving Practice.”](#)

[Watch the Webinar](#)

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Shifts decision making power about grant funding to people who are closest to the issues the grantmaker is addressing

Participatory Philanthropy

Addresses how a broad range of functions—from strategy design to grant decisions to monitoring and evaluation—across the philanthropic structure and cycle can involve people outside of the foundation's board and staff

#ShiftThePower

Encourages grantmakers to shift power to communities historically left out of philanthropy and promotes a more equitable approach to resource distribution

Community-Led or Community-Informed Philanthropy

When community stakeholders are engaged as partners to a funder, playing a meaningful and authentic role focused on sharing

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