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Mississippi Civil Rights Leader Hollis Watkins of Southern Echo leads the Emerging Leaders group in a freedom song. Photo courtesy of Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation.



Engage. Listen. Connect. Support: Building Mutual-Benefit Relationships Among Funders and Emerging Leaders

By Gayle Williams

Over the last decade, philanthropy's response to research on generational transition in the nonprofit sector has ranged from panic – “Who will carry on when the Boomers retire?” – to a big yawn – “These generational transitions always take care of themselves.”

For those of us living the transition, either as Boomers or as younger leaders, the research is up-close and personal. During my tenure at the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation,¹ investing in new and emerging leaders for social justice work in the Southeastern United States was a personal priority for me. My experience guides me to two conclusions for funders:

1. Foundations need emerging leaders as much as the leaders need funders.
2. The menu of ways funders can engage and support emerging leaders

is rich and diverse; there's something here for all types of funders.

REFRAMING LEADERSHIP

Studies of social impact and our common sense tell us that leadership is a major determining factor in success or failure of specific efforts. People make things happen – and not only people with designated “leader” titles. Leadership is activity that can come from a community resident, a program manager or a CEO. For the sake of clarity, I focus here on people in their 20s through early 40s who (continued on page 12)



challenging grantmakers
to strengthen communities

Building Mutual-Benefit Relationships Among Funders and Emerging Leaders

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are moving into significant roles in social justice work. They are creating new, more networked organizational structures and filling mid- to top-level roles in existing organizations and networks.

Younger social justice advocates are inclined toward shared leadership models that rely on contributions across a spectrum of roles. They urge funders to invest in younger talent beyond the “rock stars” who have already made it and whom foundations love to “cherry pick.” To make this point, the new Talent Philanthropy Project² helpfully re-frames and expands funders’ responses to generational leadership transition into “investment in nonprofit talent.”

WHY FOUNDATIONS NEED EMERGING LEADERS

The trite phrase “they are the future” is profoundly relevant to organized philanthropy’s current and future impact. Having grown up in a networked, more diverse world, many younger leaders exhibit the qualities required of today’s leaders, as articulated in current leadership literature. See sidebar for examples.

Typical foundation practices and processes match up poorly with this list of leadership characteristics. For the most part, foundations are stuck in old-style hierarchical, bureaucratic, slow, non-adaptive leadership patterns that are ill-suited for impact in today’s world. Foundations need to be in active, mutual-learning relationships with new social justice leaders, who can help funders develop the institutional and personal leadership capacities listed in the sidebar. In mutual relationships, younger leaders can provide experience, advice and inspiration. In turn, funders can offer emerging leaders hard-earned wisdom from history, along with connections to influencers, moral support and last but definitely not least, financial support.

This more mutual relationship challenges the existing balance of power in

typical funding relationships. From our experience at the Babcock Foundation, I can say that developing more open, trusting and mutual relationships with some grantees over time is demanding, delicate work – and possible. Core values of respect and transparency must be rooted and alive in the entire foundation, including the board. The foundation must hold itself accountable for mutuality in relationships with grantees, for example with the foundation demonstrably incorporating grantee wisdom into its decisions and grantees acknowledging value added by the funder beyond grants.

The perennial reality of “money = power” is inescapable in philanthropic relationships. However, as the number of younger nonprofit, foundation, gov-

ernment and business leaders grows, we will hopefully see more breakthroughs toward mutual, networked, inclusive partnerships for social change. These breakthroughs will require new funder practices that are natural to many younger leaders.

HOW FUNDERS CAN ENGAGE WITH AND SUPPORT EMERGING LEADERS

The menu of ways that funders can engage and support emerging leaders is rich and diverse; there’s something here for all types of funders.

First, what do emerging leaders say they need? The following themes appear in national research and two unpublished reports to the Babcock Foundation that capture the voices of approximately 30 Southern leaders. They say they need:

- Support networks of peers and elders for learning and strategy development.
- Management training and resources for organizational development.
- Development opportunities focused on horizontal and collective leadership.
- Career ladders, support during career transitions and redefinition of executive roles.
- Attention to sustaining themselves; e.g., better pay, self-care, work/life balance and reflection time.
- Support for people of color and women leaders; examination of expectations embedded in racism and gender bias placed upon them and their organizations.
- New funding models for social justice work.
- Funder investment in leadership development for social justice field.

Funder responses can be organized around four key principles essential for mutual relationships: Engage. Listen. Connect. Support. These flow and are nonlinear. Simple examples make this point: engagement is more satis-

EFFECTIVE LEADERS IN TODAY’S WORLD:

- Cross sectors and boundaries to build results-oriented partnerships.
- Practice collective leadership; they influence, persuade and motivate others, and are open to being influenced, persuaded and motivated by others.
- Are skilled at adaptive, strategic thinking; are informed by both data and intuition.
- See connections, put resources together in new ways and learn from trying new approaches; are entrepreneurial.
- Use technology tools strategically and with ease.
- Value the professional management of resources, people and organizations.
- Pay attention to sustaining themselves and their work by restoring mind, body and soul; bring spirit, love, art, cultural traditions and family into their work

fyng when the parties listen deeply to each other. Connecting younger leaders to management training opportunities might require financial support for their participation. Hiring or promoting younger people into executive positions requires support for their success.

ENGAGE: Funders can get informed, build relationships and be active with emerging leaders. Ideas for funders:

- Read the literature on next generation leaders and transitioning elders. A few sources to begin your internet search are the Building Movement Project's Generation Series of reports; Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy, Leadership Learning Community, and Grant-makers for Effective Organizations.³
- On site visits, ask to meet younger nonprofit staff and board members. Talk to them about their social justice work, their lives and their peer networks.
- In conversations with grantees, ask questions about leadership transition and talent development in the organization – and be willing to help fund it.
- On the foundation staff, be prepared for inevitable differences between younger staff and Boomers; engage in open, honest conversations to build everyone's understanding, effectiveness and enjoyment. At the Babcock Foundation, we hired consultants to facilitate difficult staff conversations about living up to our aspirational values of inclusiveness and respect when younger staff questioned how well we were doing.
- Get the foundation board engaged with emerging leaders – for example, as foundation board members, as members of working groups to inform foundation strategy, or as discussion partners at board meetings.



Participants Tom Kohler, Daa'iyah Salaam and Jeff Fugate map out entrenched, evolving and emerging issues facing Southern leaders. Photo courtesy of Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation.

LISTEN: We are probably really listening when we say less than the person to whom we are listening and find ourselves surprised, our thinking challenged or our heart stirred. Unfortunately, a common critique of funders by our nonprofit partners is that we don't listen well. Ideas for funders:

- Start with the basics: Hire staff with strong relationship and listening skills; hold staff accountable for the quality of relationships with applicants and grantees.
- Conduct objective assessments of the foundation's performance, such as the *Grantee Perception Report* from the Center for Effective Philanthropy; act on what you learn.⁴
- Support a convening of emerging leaders from your grantees, planned by them with foundation staff there to participate in mutual learning. In November 2012, the Babcock Foundation hosted such a convening with the goals of 1) informing the foundation about the next decade's approaches to promoting equity and opportunity in the South, and 2) nurturing relationships

among a small group of emerging leaders.

CONNECT: Within our foundations, we can apply what we learn from engaging and listening to improving our own practices. We can also use our social, intellectual and financial capital to help emerging leaders build their professional networks. Ideas for funders:

- Assess your foundation practices using this article's sidebar or a more comprehensive list of 21st century leadership qualities; engage highly effective younger leaders to help build new capacities at the foundation.
- Use your relationships to connect emerging and elder leaders in mentoring relationships.
- Use your technology and communications capacity to help emerging leaders in your geographic region find each other and build peer-learning networks.
- Connect emerging leaders with management training, leadership development and coaching op-



Emerging leaders Charmel Gauden and Jessica Norwood look over a timeline of important moments in Southern history created during the convening. Photo courtesy of Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation.

opportunities (and help pay for it). Examples are Rockwood Leadership Program, Stone Circles, and Courage and Renewal Academy for Leaders. Leadership Learning Community maintains a list of leadership programs on its web site.⁵

- Knit together a cohort of emerging leaders into a community of practice through in-person gatherings and online platforms. This could be a peer-led network with modest funding or a formal fellowship program. Examples of fellowship programs are the Barr Foundation's Fellows and the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund fellowship programs.⁶ Or, support fellowship programs offered by others, such as those offered by Frontline Solutions or the Association of Black Foundation Executives.⁷
- Introduce emerging leaders to other funders and influential people in your networks; become a partner in fundraising and capital aggregation.

SUPPORT: Money matters. So does activating your foundation's influence

and supporting young talent on your staff. Ideas for funders:

- Make general operating and multi-year grants. This may be the single most helpful thing funders can do to increase nonprofit impact and provide essential core support for grantees to attract, pay, train, retain and advance talented staff.
- Provide grant support for talent and organizational development, including leadership transition and leadership development.
- Support networks and partnerships of emerging leaders and their organizations with "glue" money to pay for their time learning and working together to achieve greater impact than they can alone.
- Provide seed grants for start-ups led by younger social justice activists; invest more and longer in successes.
- Fund sabbaticals and transition roles for social justice elders who cannot financially afford to leave their jobs.
- Use your foundation's web site and social media outlets to be an advocate for investment in emerging talent and their ideas.

- Make sure emerging leaders on your foundation staff and board are adequately supported with opportunities for increasing influence inside the foundation, along with mentoring, coaching, peer networks and training.

The generational transfer of leadership will indeed happen, with or without funders' intentional responses. However, to sit this out would be a huge missed opportunity for emerging leaders, funders and the communities we serve. ■

Gayle Williams is former executive director of the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation.

Notes

1. See <http://mrbf.org/>.
2. See <http://www.talentphilanthropy.org/>.
3. See <http://www.buildingmovement.org/reports>, <http://www.epip.org/>, <http://leadershiplearning.org/> and <http://geofunders.org/>.
4. See <http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/index.php?page=grantee-perception-report>.
5. See <http://www.rockwoodleadership.org/>, <http://www.stonecircles.org/>, <http://www.couragerenewal.org/programs/academy-for-leaders> and <http://leadershiplearning.org/>.
6. See <http://www.barrfoundation.org/fellows/program-detail/> and <http://www.haasjr.org/what-were-learning/resource/21st-century-fellows-program>.
7. See <http://frontlinesol.com/aboutH-PJfellowship.html> and <http://www.abfe.org/abfe1.asp?PageURL=26>.