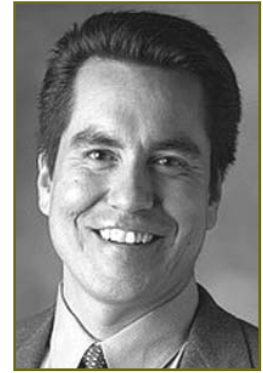


With Foundations as Partners, Communities of Color Can Share Creative Visions

by David Cournoyer



It's no secret that the United States is growing more racially and ethnically diverse. Don't you remember the breathtaking pictures of literally tens of thousands of people taking to the streets about immigration reform? Did you miss the news about the growing number of states with "majority-minority" populations?

More recently, the headlines have focused on Senator Barack Obama's courageous appeal to Americans to recognize both the progress we have made and the significant racial disparities that still exist. It was an historic call to acknowledge that we are not yet "a more perfect union" fully capitalizing on America's rich diversity, which brings a broad array of knowledge, cultural values and perspectives.

What is philanthropy doing about this? Where's the Obama-like, bold leadership? If the nimble nonprofit sector can't provide aggressive support and commitment to help the U.S. capitalize on its diversity and fully promote the voice of underserved communities, where will it come from? Unfortunately, many of us in the sector who represent communities of color are not setting our expectations very high.

Let's face facts: foundations are not diverse places. In my nonprofit work, I can't tell you how many times that I've been the only person of color in the room. If there were two, or even three, of us, I almost certainly was the only male of color. These kinds of stories are not uncommon. In one state that is about to tip majority-minority, the state's largest foundation has a single person of color among its trustees and senior staff. In my experience with situations like this, diversity - achieving it, appreciating it or investing in it - is simply not a priority.

That isn't to say that only people of color "get" it. Of course, there are also many supportive, informed white

program staff who individually practice effective and strategic philanthropy with communities of color. But all too often the *institutional* support isn't there.

Partnership Counts

More typically, a foundation's lack of diversity can result in flawed grantmaking that imposes one-size-fits-all solutions on communities of color. If philanthropy wants to help America achieve stronger, healthier and sustainable communities of color, it must work in full partnership with these communities - with mutual respect, benefit and accountability. No one partner has all the answers, so partners must respect each other's wisdom, values and priorities. To build trust into this collaboration, each partner must be open, honest and fully transparent. There cannot be trust without transparency.

Ahh, transparency. That's the goal of state legislation in California seeking to mandate reporting on the racial and ethnic makeup of foundation leadership and program officers, vendors, grantees and the constituencies they serve. Not surprisingly, foundations are crying foul; but this may be just the motivation to get them to take diversity and equity more seriously. If cynics believed Sen. Obama's appeal only came after he was trapped in a corner (by connections to his church pastor's strident remarks on racism), then just this kind of cornering might push foundations to take more aggressive action.

Unfortunately, foundations don't have a very good track record on being transparent, even though they're externally accountable for what they do with resources held in the public trust. Foundations don't place a high priority on communicating their basic workings - even at the level of program strategies and funding rationales - much less anything that might smack of bad news or

criticism - such as negative program results or critical stakeholder feedback.

So even if we agree that mandates are not very effective in changing practice or culture, can foundations police themselves in regards to their diversity and programming with communities of color? I just don't see it happening, particularly when there is such aversion to potentially bad news. If one of the concerns is the need to consider diversity within broader organizational contexts, foundations could look to the Center for Effective Philanthropy's survey of foundation staff and grantees regarding responsiveness and effectiveness. It would be easy to add a few questions about race and ethnicity to this survey, but foundation participation is optional and the results are confidential. Few if any foundations voluntarily publicize their own data currently, so do we really think one would share diversity data that might shed unflattering light?

It Helps to Put the Cards on the Table

It's difficult to have an honest discussion about diversity - much less equity and justice - when one side won't put all its cards on the table. This is preventing deeper dialogue and urgently needed work to help prepare the nation's future majority for full civic participation and socioeconomic success. It's also keeping us from making valuable connections among the knowledge of so many different peoples, which, in turn, stands in the way of broader learning and generation of new approaches. America must tap this wisdom and experience now, not later!

Within Native America, for example, there are hundreds of different tribes. While there are commonalities, there are also many differences in terms of languages, practices and perspectives. Among communities of color, Natives happen to be unique in terms of political sovereignty. Tribes are like states, with specific rights to govern that have been defined by Congress and federal court rulings. Nonetheless, Natives have much to share in terms of traditional practices and ways of thinking - from consensus-based decisionmaking and governance, holistic

health and wellness approaches, family-centered educational models, sustainable environment practices, and more.

Like many groups working in isolation, Natives frequently don't comprehend the innovation of their own programs relative to what is happening in other fields and communities. With the luxury of their broader view,

foundations should help make these linkages, leveraging learning and results. Sadly, many program officers see a Native American-focused inquiry and immediately set it aside

Foundations should help make linkages, leveraging learning and results.

as a "boutique" program with a narrow population scope. However, more experienced philanthropists would see considerable promise in investing in strategies that will have not only local impact but also potential application to affect learning and practice in other communities - be they Latino, African American or Caucasian.

It's scary how fast the world is changing in terms of complexity and increasing challenges. Now more than ever, we need creative, collaborative solutions that are based on our best thinking. We need more heads in the room, and these must include representatives of communities of color. Foundations have a critical role to play in making this happen. But it takes time, commitment and action. What we really need are philanthropic leaders who lack ego, acknowledge what they don't know, listen to and appreciate different viewpoints, value collaboration over unilateral action, and seek a common good rather than self-aggrandizement. These are the leaders who will help all our nation's communities fully participate in unleashing new visions that will benefit everyone.

David Courmoyer is co-chair of the board of directors of Native Americans in Philanthropy, a Council on Foundations affinity group that seeks to build bridges between foundations and Native communities (www.nativephilanthropy.org). He has worked at two national private foundations as well as the American Indian College Fund, and he previously worked for a decade as a television journalist. Courmoyer is an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe of South Dakota.