

Power Imbalance and the Program Work of Philanthropy

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At the close of its May 2006 meeting, Grantmakers in the Arts (GIA) board members and staff participated in a forum discussing some of the dynamics of power and grantmaking. A distilled version of Craig McGarvey's remarks is published here.

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To make a grant is to deal in power.

That's the premise driving these comments, intended as they are to provoke thought and discussion. Power imbalance exists in philanthropy, indeed, occupies the heart of the grantmaking experience. Further, honest recognition of this fact is necessary to promote the quality of reflection that can help program officers use the imbalance of power toward a philanthropy that is strategically effective and of positive impact in communities.

Two Paradoxes

Power is full of paradox, and two are helpful in making the argument that will follow.

The first comes from political scientist Karl Deutsch, who said that power is the ability not to have to learn anything. Most of us, I suspect, have had an experience in dealing with the powerful in which this insight rings of full truth. And yet how paradoxical, for power confers the ability to learn about anything and everything.

The second paradox is a central theme of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. In outline form, it runs as follows. Injustice and unequal opportunity are the result of the corrupting influence of the coalescence of power. Yet any attempt to mitigate these corrupting influences must wield power against power: Frodo, the ring bearer, must carry the one ring to the heart of Mordor and throw it back into the volcano fires from which it was forged. But the ring corrupts whoever bears it. Against power's corrupting influence, what we have is power, which, as we use it, corrupts us.

An Analogy

With these paradoxes as backdrop, the analogy of buyers and sellers can be helpful in an analysis of the ways in which power imbalance affects the transactions of philanthropy.

Sellers in a transaction must be persuaders; they need to think their way into the thoughts of the buyer, understand his or her worldview, political outlook, motivations, possible questions. Sellers must behave in such a way as to draw the buyer to them. Buyers, in the opposite role, have no such intrinsic need to understand sellers. Sellers will come to them.

Arguably, program officers play both of these roles. In the boardroom, they are sellers to the buyers of the board. Board members have little time to learn about the issues, some may have little interest (the power not to have to learn anything). Program officers must think their way into the minds and outlooks of board members, must be ready for any response, must be

perceived as an expert. The relationship can promote a culture of expertise, a culture of knowing. “I can answer any question.”

Turning toward the community, the role of the program officer is reversed. Now he or she is the buyer, and the role of the seller goes to the community leader/grantseeker. The grantseeker must be able to answer any question.

The potential corruption inherent in this power imbalance – more subtle and potentially corrosive than the old adage of “never a bad lunch, never a bad idea” for a program officer – can appear in a couple of ways. As buyer, the program officer has little inherent incentive to consider the mindset and worldview of the community leader. The phone calls will be returned, the meetings will be attended. The program officer, that is, has little incentive to behave in such a way as to draw the grantseeker into an authentic relationship.

There can also be a tendency for the presumption of expertise – the culture of knowing – to carry over from the program officer's work in the boardroom. Certainly many a community leader has been known to report such a tendency among grantmakers.

Sharing Power to Build a Culture of Learning

The argument I would make here is that the impact of grantmaking is maximized when the program officer works to promote a culture of learning, rather than knowing. This entails a conscious intent by the program officer to break down the natural constraints of buyer and seller – a conscious intent to behave in such a way as to draw community leaders into relationship.

An authentic relationship can be developed when the program officer becomes a co-learner, a transparent, equal seeker. Inquiry is placed at the center of the relationship: how knowledge can be built together, rather than managed by one or the other. For those who have tried it, the transparency of honest co-learning – an admission by the program officer that he doesn't know or understand, coupled with an expressed desire to learn – can disarm some of the most hardened sellers from the community. Power, on the part of the grantmaker, becomes the ability to learn from and with community genius.

Power, that is, is intentionally shared. Inquiry becomes a collaborative endeavor among grantor and grantee, working together to build, from practice, knowledge that can be used to improve practice. A host of challenges must be dealt with openly in order to create such a learning partnership, beginning explicitly with sharing the development of decision-making structures.

The most powerful use of power, with the greatest consequent impact on grantmaking, is when its imbalance is openly acknowledged, when co-inquiry is set at the heart of the imbalance, when the power is shared.

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