

LISTEN
to **COMMUNITY**

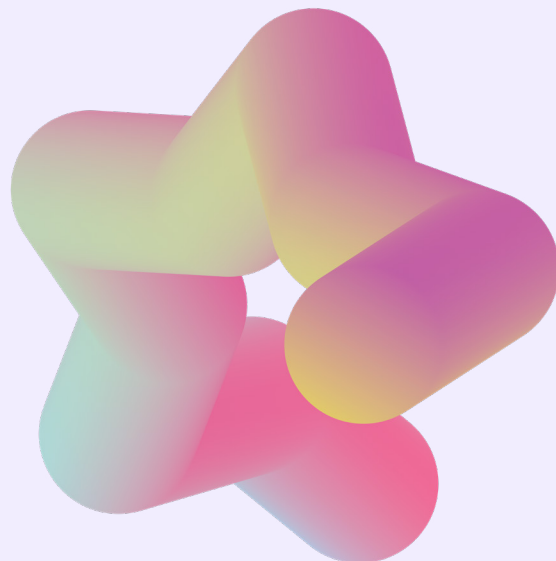
Community on Board

A Tool for Shifting Power through Foundation Governance

Impacted communities have the right and the capacity to determine their own lives — full stop. Philanthropy is at its best when it works in service of that self-determination. A foundation’s boardroom provides a unique opportunity to practice democracy and bring funders into closer relationship with community.

Foundation boards are where strategy gets set, resources get allocated, and the terms of debate get defined. Bringing impacted community members into that space, not as advisors or consultants, but as governing equals, goes to the heart of a funder’s decision-making power and sense of stewardship.

This tool offers provocations, practical tips, and tools to transform foundation governance as a vehicle for listening in ways that can shift power to impacted communities — ultimately enabling greater equity, accountability, and results that communities define for themselves.



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Have questions about the toolkit? Or want to learn more?

Please reach out to co-authors Katy Love and Gita Gulati-Partee. “Community on Board” draws on their collective decades of work with boards and foundations of all types.

[Contact](#)



Katy Love



Gita Gulati-Partee

Introducing the Toolkit →

This resource offers insights, recommendations, practical tips, and provocations to help you transform your organization's governance in ways that shift power to impacted communities.

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What we mean by "Impacted Community" →

Go beyond simplistic measures of diversity and use an intentional power analysis and equity lens to keep the focus where it belongs — on the people and communities most harmed by structural racism and other systemic inequities.

Looking Inward: Culture & Power →

Examining and reworking your foundation's culture and power dynamics is part of an ongoing process that must begin in the early stages of board transformation and be regularly revisited over time.

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- [Rethinking the meaning of ownership](#)
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Looking Forward: Building a Board Differently →

Once examinations of your foundation's culture, practices, and structures are underway, the next work is relational — finding, engaging, and welcoming impacted community members in ways that are genuine, mutual, and ongoing.

- [Recruiting for purpose](#)
- [Accelerating change with a cohort](#)
- [Getting the word out](#)
- [Selecting new board members](#)
- [Compensating board members](#)

Building New Norms & Practices Together →

This is not a routine board refresh; it's an opportunity to shape new power dynamics and structures and co-create a new culture around governance.

Leadership Roles



Making Decisions



Meetings



Communication & Conflict



Conflicts of Interest



Accessibility



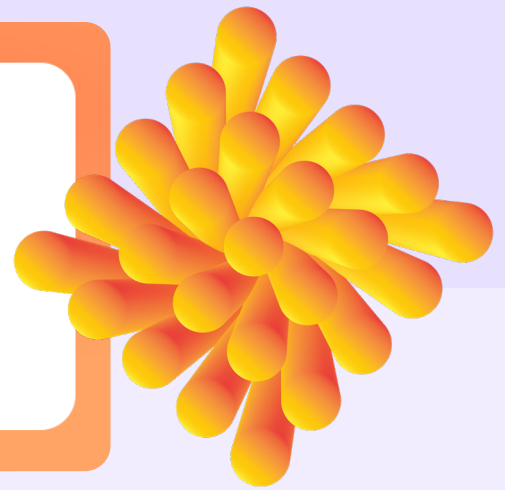
Getting Started & Sticking with It →

Foundations vary widely in context and approach, yet a core set of elements can support any genuine effort to shift power to impacted communities through governance.

Introducing the Toolkit

This resource offers insights, recommendations, practical tips, and provocations to help you transform your organization’s governance in ways that shift power to impacted communities.

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Why we created this tool

This tool aims to help foundations be more reflective of, accountable to, and authorized by their communities.

BoardSource’s board governance model called Purpose-Driven Board Leadership (PDBL), calls for boards to challenge their own authority and power, and suggests that the voice of community-benefitting organizations must be authorized by those impacted by the organization’s work. This notion of “authorized voice” turns upside down the way power typically flows between a foundation and the communities it exists to benefit, and is often the part of the PDBL model that foundations struggle with most.

Listening to impacted communities through the governing board is not just about a recruitment strategy to change the composition of the board — it is about changing the culture of the board and the entire foundation. **We invite you to use this tool to be the change you seek.**

Who this tool is for and how to use it

We wrote “Community on Board” for staff and board members of staffed foundations with more conventional governing boards ready to make changes to center community voice. The tool focuses on decision-making boards, not other kinds of committees or advisory groups that offer input or feedback but hold no decision-making authority.

We have included examples from a variety of foundations and foundation types, including fiscally sponsored or pooled funds, to help you see practices in action as well as identify sojourners for mutual support. We encourage you to consider ideas even from organizations that look different from yours, learning from their experiences and adapting them to what’s right for you. **The question of “who decides?” is an essential one in any context.**

We also encourage you to reexamine what you may see as legal barriers to change. What many believe or assume are legal requirements regarding the board or its processes are often just habits or traditions. In most cases bylaws and other policies can be changed — and should be changed to make space for new and needed voices and to re-center the board on purpose and accountability to impacted communities.

We invite you into this tool at any point on your journey toward more community ownership, community power, and institutional accountability to impacted communities via board governance. It’s designed to offer insight and practical recommendations at various stages of your work, from exploration to active transformation.

Where are you in the journey toward more community ownership?

Level 1: Beginning →

You understand why bringing impacted community members onto the board matters and are exploring ways to take initial action. Use this tool to focus on building a shared “why,” making current norms and practices explicit, and developing a plan for cultivating authentic and mutually beneficial relationships.

Level 2: Developing →

You are actively building relationships and skills and taking meaningful steps to bring impacted community members onto the board. Use this tool to focus on creating high-leverage processes and structures to support shifts in composition and culture.

Level 3: Embedding →

Impacted community members are on the board and you are working to transform the culture of the board and the foundation. Use this tool to focus on documenting and institutionalizing supportive norms and practices while also building the muscle for continuous adaptive change.

Disclaimer: This tool is not a substitute for legal or financial advice. Consult your own legal counsel and other advisors as you make changes in your own context. Note that state nonprofit statutes vary, and some foundations are governed by trust documents or charter provisions that will need to be addressed.

Resources

We are informed and inspired by peer efforts in this space and recommend them for further insight:

GEO convenes and supports grantmakers who are shifting governance, as well as a collective of philanthropy infrastructure organizations focused on reimagining governance. "[Toward Meaningful, Valuable, Equitable Governance](#)" highlights promising practices that grantmakers are testing and learning from as they explore governance purpose, roles, relationships and processes.



The **National Center for Family Philanthropy's** [Family Giving Lifecycle framework](#) advises family foundations to center community by focusing on the questions "for whom and with whom" when considering governance structure and decision-making processes.



Grounded in its Purpose-Driven Board Leadership framework, **BoardSource** published "[Authorized Voice & Power in the Boardroom: Reimagining Governance to Fulfill Philanthropy's Promise](#)" with an invitation to reflect on who has legitimacy in governing, and whether and how to effect change at the governance level.



Nonprofit Quarterly published a [three-part series](#) challenging traditional governance models and offering a new vision for boards. The series focuses on nonprofits but it has great relevance to foundations, especially around the mindsets and practices that support liberatory governance.



Please continue to check back for additional resources, further discussions, and a growing collection of more comprehensive examples.

About the authors

Gita Gulati-Partee is the founder and principal of OpenSource Leadership Strategies, which builds equity mindsets, skill sets, and tool sets for social progress. She was the equity advisor to Fund for Shared Insight and is the co-director for Listen to Community. Katy Love is a practitioner of participatory philanthropy and an independent consultant. She co-led Fund for Shared Insight's participatory climate initiative and is the co-director for Listen to Community.

This tool draws on our collective decades of experience working with boards in our roles as consultants to and employees of institutional foundations of all forms, donor advised funds, funder collaboratives and pooled funds, and individual donors. We are grateful to the many leaders who shared their stories with us, and allowed us to share them with you.

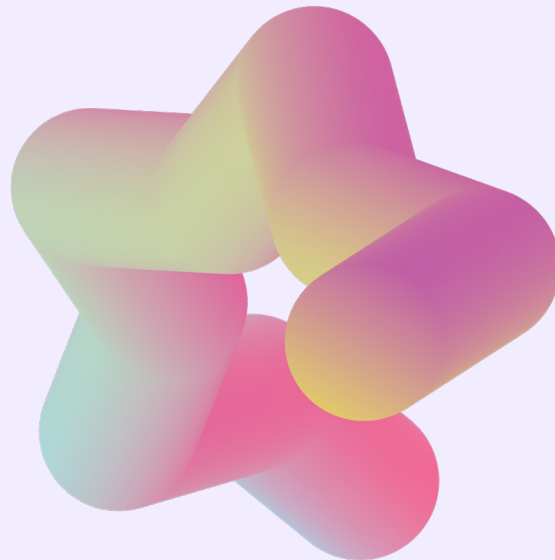


Gita Gulati-Partee



Katy Love

Contact



What we mean by “Impacted Community”

Go beyond simplistic measures of diversity and use an intentional power analysis and equity lens to keep the focus where it belongs — on the people and communities most harmed by structural racism and other systemic inequities.

This tool focuses on including impacted community members on foundation governing boards. We use the term “impacted community” to mean the people and communities harmed by structural racism and other systemic inequities that can bring lived experience to bear on the systems and issues that the foundation seeks to address.

We use “impacted community” (singular) to refer to the concept, and “impacted communities” (plural) to refer to actual communities and the plurality of multi-faceted individual people that comprise them. From the vantage point of a foundation’s history, mission, and context, there is rarely only one discretely defined impacted community.

iF, A Foundation for Radical Possibility’s mission statement says: “We achieve our vision by centering the leadership and expertise of Black people and people of the global majority in the Washington, DC region who live at the sharpest intersection of systems of oppression, in particular race, class, and gender identity.”



Not about simplistic measures of diversity

While engaging impacted communities will bring new attributes and perspectives to the foundation board, we are not talking about simplistic measures of “diversity.” For example, sometimes a family foundation’s first non-family board members are “family adjacent” — close friends or a trusted financial advisor or legal counsel who closely reflect the family’s interests. They would not meet our definition of impacted communities.

Grantees are not necessarily proxies

While grantees play an important role in the social change ecosystem and also should be considered for foundation board seats, we’re not using “grantee” as a proxy for impacted communities unless the grantee organizations themselves are reflective of and accountable to impacted communities.

We encourage foundations to use an intentional power analysis and equity lens to keep the focus where it belongs — on the people and communities furthest from conventional power structures and most harmed by decisions made without them — and to build authentic relationships that can transform the board’s work and worldview.

Don’t tokenize or make assumptions

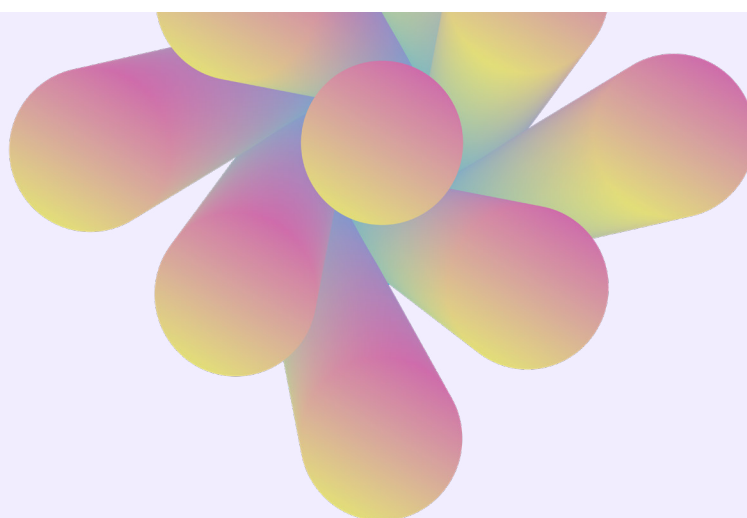
At the same time, like anyone, impacted community members come in all roles and titles and have a range of skills and perspectives to offer. People who have wealth or a particular social or economic status today may have profound lived experience with any number of circumstances that intersect with the foundation’s mission and guide their sense of purpose and accountability. The point is to neither tokenize nor make assumptions based on obvious attributes.

Use an intentional power analysis and equity lens

Instead, we encourage foundations to *use an intentional power analysis and equity lens* to keep the focus where it belongs — on the people and communities furthest from conventional power structures and most harmed by decisions made without them — and to *build authentic relationships that can transform the board’s work and worldview.*

Not a static idea

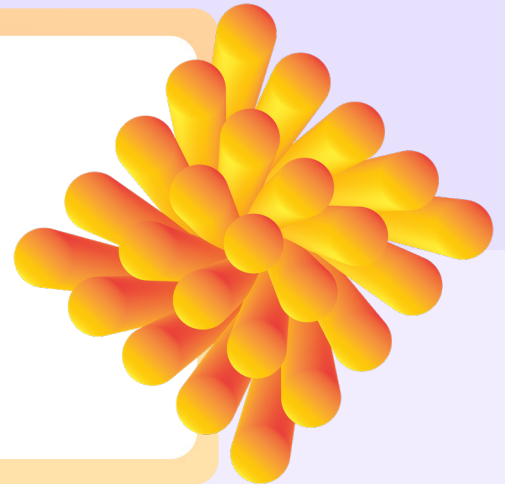
Over time, as more, ever diverse people from impacted communities engage on the board and help shape discussions in the boardroom, they will bring new insights about who is impacted and how. And, of course, the context will continue to change. “Impacted community” is not a static idea or identity, but rather an orientation toward continuous engagement and evolution.



Looking Inward: Culture & Power

Examining and reworking your foundation's culture and power dynamics is part of an ongoing process that must begin in the early stages of board transformation and be regularly revisited over time.

- Confronting dominant culture
- Rethinking the meaning of ownership
- Understanding fiduciary responsibility
- Using bylaws to spark change
- Describing the job
- Questions to prompt reflection



The only way to make meaningful change is to be direct and honest about power dynamics, actively work to mitigate them, and intentionally shape your foundation's culture to meet your vision of listening to shift power. Ways of doing business are often passed down through generations of boards and leaders. Newer board members tend to defer to more seasoned ones, and everyone tends to defer to the lawyers, accountants, bankers, and businesspeople on the board. This makes it really hard to change the board by simply changing who sits in the board seats.

Making real change, even with new people around the table, requires exposing, interrogating, and rethinking assumptions, norms, and practices that may be both directing and limiting your foundation's relationship with impacted communities. Examining and reworking your foundation's culture and power dynamics is an ongoing process that funders dedicated to transforming the board must do early to enable change, and regularly over time as the board changes.

“Often when foundations think about bringing impacted community members onto the board, their focus is on the mechanics of the process and whether the community members are ready for board service; this lens really needs to be flipped so boards consider first if they are ready and prepared to bring on impacted community members as board member equals. Boards must move from wanting a diversity of experiences to desiring material inclusion with all board members having the ability to shape strategy, policy, and programming which comes through rigorous discussion, disagreement, and compromise.”

Ricshawn Adkins Roane

Executive Director and Independent Trustee, Weissberg Foundation

Confronting dominant culture

An important step for funders is to get better at seeing, naming, and changing norms that perpetuate a “power-over” relationship that reflects and supports white dominant culture* and/or for-profit corporate-influenced models and norms. Here are some common ways dominant culture shows up in philanthropy’s boardrooms:

* Tema Okun’s cataloging of attributes is continuously updated through the website (divorcing) White Supremacy Culture. Okun states: “White supremacy culture is the widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of our groups (many if not most of them), our communities, our towns, our states, our nation, teaching us both overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value, whiteness is value.”

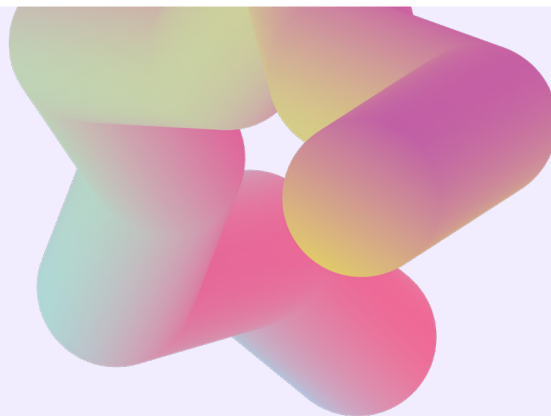
Confronting dominant culture

What qualifies as “expertise”

- Many foundations hold an explicit or implicit preference for formal credentials to validate a board member’s expertise, overlooking and undervaluing the know-how that comes from lived experience, or assuming that lived and learned expertise are mutually exclusive.
- Many foundations have internalized an understanding of “objectivity” that drives them to actually seek distance between the institution and impacted communities. This can mask self-interests that many typical foundation board members have, while unfairly blocking impacted community members from participating in board decisions that directly affect them.
- Foundations can over rely on the written word and hold a narrow idea of what qualifies as good writing. Communication outside of meetings often takes place over email and through long dockets of materials to read before board meetings. Lengthy memos and reports tend to be heavy on jargon, acronyms, and technical language that can enforce a line between insiders and outsiders.

What qualifies as “professionalism”

- Many foundations hold meetings and events in formal and fancy spaces far from where impacted communities typically engage and have strict expectations of “business” attire.
- Being “nice” limits important debate and masks differences of perspective. When conflict is discouraged, people with perspectives further from the mainstream can disengage and group think can take over.
- Strong emotional expressions can be judged inappropriate in many foundation boardrooms. Discussing community issues in the abstract with cool detachment is lauded, while those who speak with passion and urgency can be dismissed as too close to the issues to be rational.



Confronting dominant culture

What qualifies as “**leadership**”

- Many see leadership as an individual exercising power over followers, rather than seeing it as collective or distributed practice. There can be a tendency to value charisma and extroverted qualities while overlooking more relational or collaborative approaches.
- Many foundations operate with top-down decision making often held by the executive director and board chair. Sometimes there’s an assumption that the board should weigh in on everything and not defer to the staff; or, at the opposite extreme, the board outsources what should be its work to staff.
- When it comes to information flows, the board often over-indexes to “confidentiality” rather than transparency and trust. Board members who have access to certain information get it because of their personal relationships with those who have it, and thus the “real” discussions and decisions might happen outside the established processes, such as on the golf course or over drinks at the club.

What qualifies as “**success**”

- Many foundations have a tendency to value tasks over relationships. Board time is focused only on the “work” at hand, rather than helping board members get to know each other, build trust, and share expertise. The calendar, often scheduled around board members’ convenience, drives the sense of urgency, rather than the community’s interests or timeline.
- Foundations can over rely on quantitative metrics and data, which are believed to be neutral and objective, over qualitative forms of data, such as first-hand accounts. Meaningful social change requires a longer view, with outcomes that are harder to measure and take credit for.
- Though philanthropy often purports to support risk and innovation, boards often feel their primary role is to safeguard finances, defining risk only in financial terms and ignoring other risks, such as lost credibility with the community or reduced social impact.

Rethinking the meaning of ownership

Engaging impacted community members in foundation governance, and doing it with integrity and care, requires disrupting deep assumptions about whose board and organization it is in the first place. Who comprises the “we”? The words used in the boardroom are an entry point to the deeper mindset shifts needed to point the foundation’s accountability to impacted communities.

This mindset shift might be especially challenging for family foundations — where family members might see their name on the front door and photo on the wall in addition to having a family story that is closely intertwined with the foundation’s. We encourage family foundations not to brush over feelings of loss that might accompany board change, even when family members themselves seek it. The National Center for Family Philanthropy* has many useful resources to support family members in making the shift — in mindset and practice — from ownership to stewardship.

A mindset shift is needed across foundation types and among board members from all walks of life. Governance derived from for-profit norms** can lead to conflating board and staff leaders with “owners,” donors with “shareholders” and “customers,” and grantees with “suppliers” and “contractors.” In this formulation, “community” doesn’t fit easily: at best, perhaps thought of as the foundation’s “market”; at worst, not thought of at all.

* [National Center for Family Philanthropy](#)

** [The Source Codes of Foundation Culture](#), Grantmakers for Effective Organizations

Who comprises the “we”? The words used in the boardroom are an entry point to the deeper mindset shifts needed to point the foundation’s accountability to impacted communities.

Understanding fiduciary responsibility

As stewards of the public trust, fiduciary responsibility is a threshold purpose for a foundation board. BoardSource explains nonprofit fiduciary duty and responsibilities require board members to “exercise reasonable care in all decision making” and “act for the good of the organization rather than the benefit of themselves.”* This seems straightforward. The problem arises when a foundation board does not put purpose first and sees assets, risks, and accountabilities only through a financial lens.

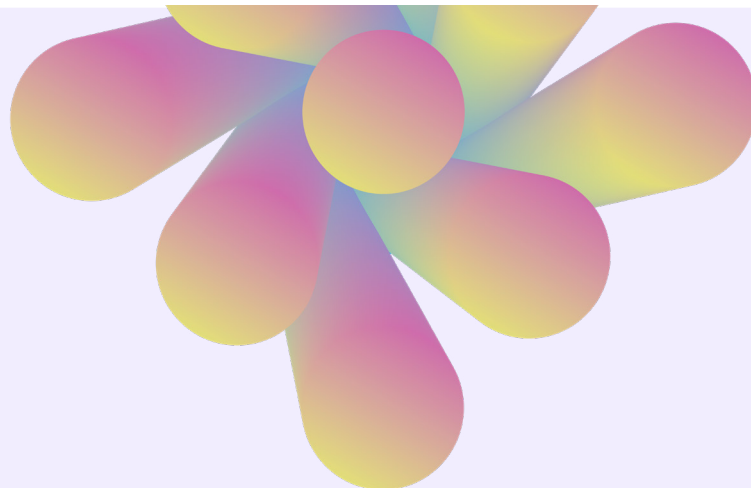
In for-profit settings, “fiduciary responsibility” focuses on protecting and growing financial assets and maximizing shareholder profits. Board members from those contexts can carry that orientation to philanthropy.

Even board members without for-profit experience can defer to their counterparts and absorb this orientation. We’ve heard countless board members use “fiduciary” synonymously with “financial.” In fact, the term does not inherently refer to finances, but rather any situation in which one party puts its trust and confidence in another.

Through the provision of tax benefits, the community places its trust and confidence in the foundation to use its financial and other assets in the community’s best interest. A foundation board’s primary loyalty — its fiduciary responsibility — is to honor the public trust by ensuring the organization fulfills its charitable purpose.

With more community-relevant knowledge on the board, the foundation can make better decisions and have greater impact. Being more connected to community members enables a foundation to be accountable to the people actually impacted by its funds and decisions — putting the community at the center as the institution’s primary stakeholder, owner, and fiduciary responsibility.

* [Nonprofit Fiduciary Duty + Responsibilities](#), BoardSource



Understanding fiduciary responsibility

The **Compton Foundation** diligently documented the “six best things” it did as part of its intentional spend out journey, including redefining its fiduciary duty as responsibility to social movements.*



When the **Elmina B. Sewall Foundation** redefined its definition of fiduciary responsibility,** the process activated and inspired the staff and board and informed decisions about increasing the grants budget and re-aligning the use of financial resources around the foundation’s shared values. Following approval of the redefinition, the staff also recommended and the board approved a five- year grants budget.

Elmina B. Sewall
FOUNDA T I O N

* “We redefined our fiduciary duty as responsibility to social movements.” Compton Foundation

** “Definition of Fiduciary Responsibility,” Trust Based Philanthropy Project, Elmina B. Sewall Foundation

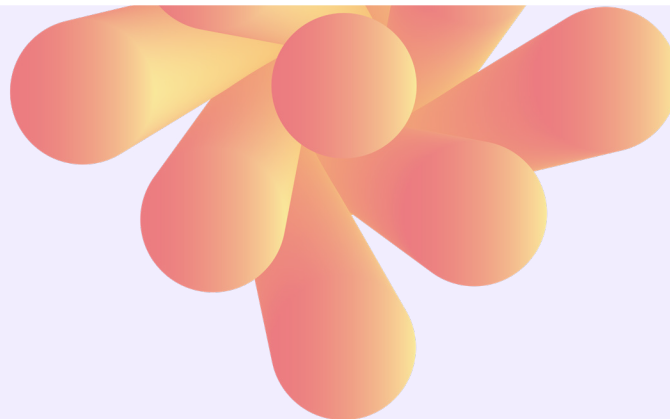
Using bylaws to spark change

Contrary to the way they sound, bylaws are not dictated by the law. Rather, they are the rules that an organization determines for itself. Bylaws can dictate when and how the board meets, how decisions are made, how information is shared, and how work gets done. Once written down, they often feel immutable. But save for a few exceptions (like a health conversion foundation created under conditions set by a state attorney general, where some changes may require outside approval), most bylaws can be changed by the organization itself without external approval. Even a trust document establishing the foundation likely has a provision for amending it.

At many organizations, bylaws were created simply by following a template drafted by legal counsel. These templates can mirror for-profit norms that bias towards the wealthy class, screening out the expertise that resides in impacted communities and perpetuating a status quo idea about what leadership looks like. Bylaws, policy manuals, committee charters, or other governing documents might require, for example, that board members meet eligibility requirements around professional and social networks, education levels, or professional credentials. At community foundations or others foundations that raise money, they may include expectations of financial contributions.

Family foundations sometimes have governing policies that require a certain number or percentage of board seats go to family members. While these requirements may reflect a desire to maintain family connectedness, pass philanthropic values to subsequent generations, or protect a family's legacy, the upshot is they allow families to maintain "ownership" over a foundation's financial assets.

It's good practice to periodically review bylaws and identify changes that would make space for new and needed voices and to re-center the board on purpose and accountability to impacted communities. We advise you to seek legal counsel to guide your particular circumstance.



Using bylaws to spark change

One community foundation that updated its mission to name its equity commitment and to center impacted communities was shocked to see how much bias inadvertently lurked in its bylaws. The bylaws specified governing powers that focused exclusively on making business decisions and managing the business of the foundation, with no mention of accountability to mission or impacted community. Various provisions of the bylaws focused far more attention on donors and gifts to the foundation than on benefit to the community.

This community foundation's bylaws listed board qualifications that specified skills and experience in accounting, banking, law, investments, philanthropy, and nonprofit trusteeship, but only "awareness" of the needs of the communities served. This board was composed overwhelmingly of business owners, bank executives, real estate developers, and leaders of the local hospital and college — all caring individuals and dedicated volunteers who had very little first-hand knowledge of or experience with the foundation's priority neighborhoods or issues. Because this board, like most, was self-electing, the overall profile of the board perpetuated itself term after term, despite good intentions to diversify.

This foundation decided to largely re-write its bylaws. They began by aligning the board's purpose to stewarding the foundation's resources to achieve its community-centered mission. Further, they named the need to seek out lived expertise that could help the board live up to that purpose. Finally, they specified structures and processes that supported that purpose, including board nominations processes. Though the initial push to revise the bylaws came from the executive leader as part of recentering impacted communities in the community foundation's purpose, the board exercised its authority to approve these changes that ultimately would change the composition, culture, and work of the board.

One additional outcome of the bylaws revision was being honest about the board's role in fundraising and de-coupling board service from fundraising. Like many community foundations, this one had a "give/get" orientation that made high net worth the most valuable attribute for the board. Foundations that raise money might consider having a donor advisory board or fundraising committee for large donors. Refocusing the board's purpose to mission stewardship and community accountability required some redesigning of other functions, such as fundraising and donor engagement, that ultimately allowed this community foundation to more authentically connect with different segments of the community.

Using bylaws to spark change

“Family foundations often wrestle with whether and how to add community members and worry about the power dynamics when family and nonfamily sit on the same board. The original bylaws of **The Ford Family Foundation** in Oregon stipulate that only two board seats (out of a minimum of seven) can be held by members of the Ford family. A family member cannot serve as chair. This practice ensures that community perspective always carries more weight in the boardroom.”*



Kolibri Foundation, a family foundation in New York, deliberately established a movement-led governance model ** on its board. The three family members knew they wanted to be in the minority with movement leaders holding the majority of seats. The family members opted for a model of shared governance to ensure that movements were reflected throughout the foundation.



“The most powerful part of Kolibri was our decision to invite movement leaders to help us design mission, vision, and everything that became the Kolibri Foundation. We started as three family members and three movement members, but we always wanted to be outnumbered by movement board members. We rewrote the bylaws to state that there would be no other family members who could join the board. Today, we have five movement board members and three family members.”

Eileen Farbman

Co-founder & Board Co-chair, Kolibri Foundation

* “[Toward Meaningful, Valuable, Equitable Governance](#),” page 17, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, Trust Based Philanthropy Project, Ford Family Foundation

** Podcast: “[Creating a ‘Movement-Led Family Foundation’: A Conversation with the Kolibri Foundation](#),” Listen to Community

Describing the job

We encourage foundations seeking to transform board culture to write or update their board job description, handbook, and other related materials to make explicit how the board is accountable to community. Use the opportunity to address unnamed biases and longstanding habits in service of assembling a board whose collective skills, experiences, perspectives, and identities best reflect the communities the foundation seeks to benefit and can best deliver the communities' desired outcomes.

After updating the board job description, a foundation may find that current board members don't fit the bill. This realization can catalyze investments in training and development to help the board transition. Or it might push foundations to recognize that a new board needs to be entirely re-formed.

A critical mass of board members terming out can be an opportunity to refresh the board and reflect the desired intention. If there is not a natural turnover opportunity, foundations can consider growing the number of board seats, or, as Ananda Valenzuela writes, it might be "the time to assess whether some people need to leave in order for your board to be able to begin this new chapter in your [institution's] journey." In this approach, a minimum number of board members may be legally required to oversee the transition to a new board.

* ["A New Framework for Governance Duties: Loving Accountability and Abundant Resourcing,"](#) Ananda Valenzuela, Nonprofit Quarterly, February 11, 2025

To transform the board culture, write or update the board job description, handbook, and other related materials to make explicit how the board is accountable to the community.

Describing the job

Elements of a job description

The job description should lay out answers to these key questions that speak to all potential and current board members:

Q: What is the purpose of the board and what role does it play in the organization?

The board description should assert that the governing board is a vehicle for community ownership and power as well as institutional accountability to impacted communities. With impacted community members participating, the board can more closely align the foundation's strategy, operations, and culture to the visions of impacted communities.

Q: What is the role of board members and what authority do they have?

Impacted community members who join the board must have the same role and authority as all board members. They should not be tokenized or given the impression that they are advisory or junior in any way. Nor should they have added responsibilities or labor, such as consulting with segments of the community, while other board members need not consult with anyone.

Q: What skills, experiences, and perspectives are needed on the board?

The foundation can define "impacted communities" and articulate how lived experience is a critical form of expertise alongside more traditional skills in human resources, finance, and the law. These are not mutually exclusive — impacted community members might bring needed technical expertise along with insights into the community's needs, assets, and aspirations. The foundation can also lay out the mix of perspectives and skills that can be helpful at the board table, including expertise in mission-aligned investing, participatory decision making, or equitable evaluation.

Describing the job

Elements of a job description *(continued)*

The job description should lay out answers to these key questions that speak to all potential and current board members:

Q: What are the time commitments, requirements, and expectations of the role?

Don't assume everyone has the same idea of what board service looks like. Be explicit about the number and frequency of meetings, how long they last, what they entail, how members should prepare, and whether they are in person or on screen. Also include information about additional commitments, such as committee meetings, retreats, and social events.

It stands to reason that as the board changes, the board will need to change. Ask board prospects what would help them engage and contribute fully, then adapt norms and practices together.

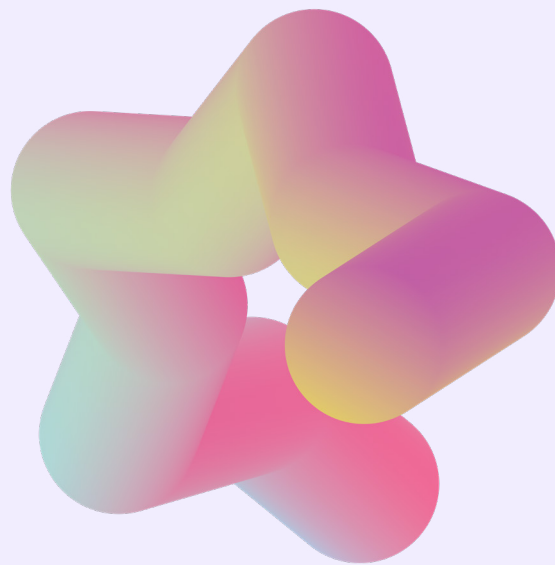
Q: What is the benefit of board service?

The board job description should convey reciprocity to all board members — not only what board members do for the organization but how board service can benefit them. The foundation can be proactive in making the experience a genuine value add, not a diversion of talent and resources, for impacted communities and the individuals who join the board.

The board job description should clarify the benefits to participants, including any compensation, professional development, and/or the ability to direct discretionary funds to grantee organizations.

The board job description and handbook should include:

- ✓ Foundation purpose, mission, history, community, staff
- ✓ Board purpose, with explicit mention of being a vehicle for community ownership
- ✓ Board composition and structure (as related to purpose)
- ✓ Board's role in grantmaking (e.g., approving docket versus making grants)
- ✓ How board decisions are made
- ✓ Term lengths and term limits
- ✓ Current board officers and committee chairs
- ✓ Board committees
- ✓ Nomination and selection process and criteria
- ✓ Expectations and core practices such as meeting frequency, time, location
- ✓ Compensation and other benefits to board members
- ✓ Onboarding process and any continuous learning opportunities





Questions to prompt reflection on where your board is

By making an honest assessment of the current state of the board, you can get a more realistic sense of what it will take to change — not just in composition but in culture. The goal is to shift orientation from “How might we include some impacted community members on our board?” to “How can we reorganize the board as a vehicle for community ownership and power as well as institutional accountability to impacted communities?”

Just as reading an organization’s budget can reveal its truest values, looking at a foundation’s board reveals a lot about to whom or what the foundation is accountable.

Q: Does the board see the foundation’s role as mainly internal operations and finances, or also as using its assets to create the greatest community impact?

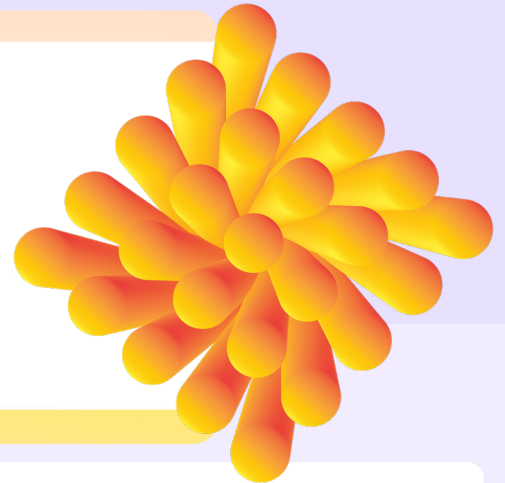
Q: Who determines what that value is and how it is delivered?

Q: Are decision makers primarily financially powerful people, or communities most impacted by systemic inequities and excluded from power?

Looking Forward: Building a Board Differently

Once examinations of your foundation's culture, practices, and structures are underway, the next work is relational — finding, engaging, and welcoming impacted community members in ways that are genuine, mutual, and ongoing.

- Recruiting for purpose
- Accelerating change with a cohort
- Getting the word out
- Selecting new board members
- Compensating board members



Recruiting for purpose

Many boards use a matrix to map the identities and competencies of board members and reveal gaps. But these often reflect conventional assumptions, privileging skills and credentials, like accounting, alongside demographics, such as gender, race, and age. The risk is recruiting for the same profile the board has always had.

Whether or not a formal matrix is used, begin with an understanding of who already has access and voice on the board and who doesn't but should. Be explicit about giving at least equal weight to lived experience, first-hand perspectives, and accountability to community as to technical skills and attributes. And make sure you are actively creating opportunities and looking in the right places for people whose lives are impacted by the foundation's decisions but whose voices are least represented in the room.

Funders can turn to their existing relationships and networks to find — or build! — pipelines for community members to join their boards. Many foundations connect with community through their grantees, which can introduce them to community leaders and residents. Other foundations engage community members through their own community convenings, participatory grantmaking practices, or advisory boards. When possible, board and staff members may themselves go into communities, attending school, sports, worship, or other community events in order to build relationships directly and personally.

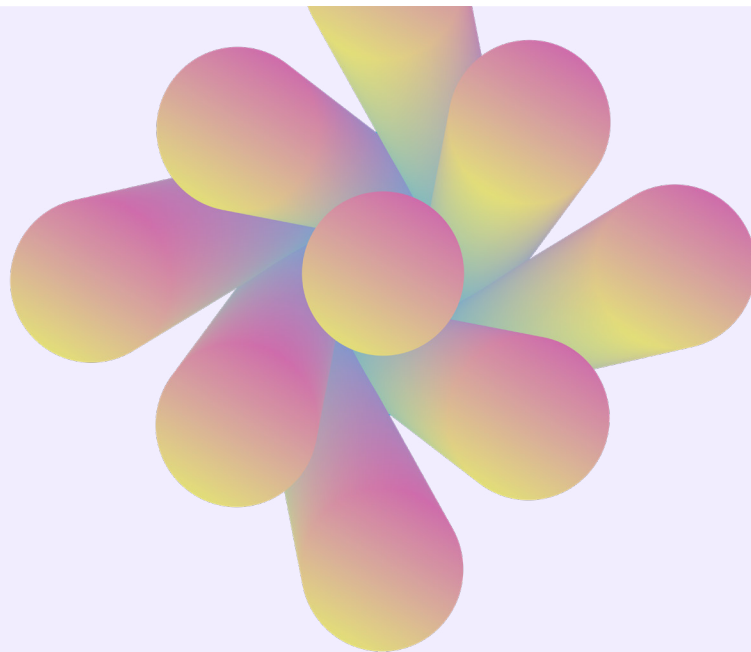
These touchpoints and relationships can lay the groundwork for identifying prospective board members. Social media and electronic outreach can play a role, but a personal touch goes a much longer way in building trust and insight.

Recruiting for purpose

Diverse City Fund has a participatory grantmaking committee comprised of grantee representatives that serves as a pipeline to the board.



After engaging in extensive internal work, the **Weissberg Foundation** in Virginia launched a statewide application and interview process to increase the number of independent trustees from two to five who now serve alongside five family trustees.



Accelerating change with a cohort

Bring impacted community members onto the board in cohorts of at least two or three people at a time, and in numbers that represent at least 30 percent of the entire board. We encourage this approach because:


This aims to create a **solid critical mass** that can help individuals feel and exercise their agency more quickly.

With new members occupying a critical mass of board seats and **feeling comfortable to participate fully**, change across the foundation will accelerate.

It **casts a gaze on the board as a whole**, forcing tough decisions about who will and will *not* serve on the board and adjustments to conventional recruitment and selection processes that have produced conventional boards.

The conversation will change more quickly, leading to new ways of thinking and doing for the foundation. **Change will beget more change**, and a new virtuous cycle can take hold.

Accelerating change with a cohort

When the **Cypress Foundation** added five grassroots community organizers and resource mobilizers from across the Carolinas to its governing body, 40% of its members were now drawn directly from the foundation's movement partners. 

“We also know that 40% representation from movement partners is meaningful progress, and not the finish line. Representation is not the same as power, and seats at the table are not the same as shared agenda-setting. The deeper work is building a governance culture where movement partners can shape what gets prioritized, how tradeoffs are made, what risks we take, and what we refuse. It’s building processes where community-rooted leaders aren’t simply consulted; they are resourced, supported, and positioned to lead alongside us with clarity and real authority.”

Chi-Ante Jones

Co-Founder and Chief Reparations Officer, Cypress Foundation



CYPRESSFUND

Getting the word out

A position announcement, which should be no more than a page or two, should cover the role of the board and the role, opportunities, expectations, requirements, and commitments for individual board members. It should also include information about contacting staff and their availability.

Announce the opportunity directly and through trusted community partners. Use messages that are honest, in plain language, and culturally grounded. You might host informational sessions and office hours or post flyers where the community already congregates.

The **Andrus Family Fund** created a one-page announcement seeking candidates for community board members.*



The **Elmina B. Sewall Foundation** in Maine created an open call for applications in 2021 “in order to diversify [their] board and to bring in experiences and perspectives currently underrepresented.” The call included information about the board’s role, time commitment to serve, and the payment of a quarterly stipend.**

Elmina B. Sewall
FOUNDATION

* [“Call for Board Members, 2021,”](#) Andrus Family Fund

** [“Call for Applications,”](#) Elmina B. Sewall Foundation

Getting the word out

Tips for announcements, applications, and interview:

Tip: In application forms or interviews, only ask what is needed for decision making.

Tip: Include a timeline in communications.

Tip: Avoid creating a false sense of urgency! This will be the number one priority for no one else, and shouldn't be.

Tip: Ensure someone at the foundation proactively communicates and is responsive to application or announcement questions.

Tip: Schedule interviews to be spacious and give plenty of lead time. Also share the questions in advance to allow for reflection and preparation, and be sure to make time for candidates to ask questions of their own.

The **Andrus Family Fund** asks board candidates four questions:

1. What draws you to AFF's mission towards abolition of youth incarceration and foster system, and how are you personally connected to these issues?
2. How do you define racial & social justice and how has your understanding evolved over time? What role does social and racial justice play in your life?
3. What do you think the role of philanthropy should be in advancing racial & social justice?
4. What values, skills, experiences and strengths would you bring to the AFF board?



Getting the word out

Compare different methods of building a new board

There are many different ways to build a new board with care and integrity. Each has its strengths and trade-offs.

Method	Pros	Cons
Open call - the foundation puts out an announcement and anyone can put their name in the hat for consideration	Gets beyond current relationships; introduces the foundation to a broader audience; offers transparency and accessibility	Favors those with access to the foundation's communications channels and who feel comfortable asserting themselves for opportunities; creates work for applicants to respond to the call and for reviewers to review responses
A foundation nominations committee collects suggestions - best when using a snowball method to get beyond one-degree relationships	Invites a conversation and a bi-directional interview – where a candidate is just as much assessing the foundation board and opportunity as the board is; can be resource light and build relationships	Can reproduce existing power dynamics; offers limited transparency; can exclude those outside of existing networks
Community nominators - through a peer selection process (e.g. a more community proximate partner such as grantees or the United Way makes the initial selection)	Real community ownership of selected members; brings power shifting earlier in the selection process; increases accountability	Limits direct relationship building between funder and community members; funder may not like outcome; passes on labor and burden from funder; could create tensions within community
A search firm - vetted for values alignment and community orientation to ensure the process is not extractive or bureaucratic for applicants.	Can be well structured; time efficient; aligns role to needs	Relies on existing networks and creates risk of gatekeeping; offers limited transparency; can be time or resource intensive to manage

Selecting new board members

Who will ultimately decide — the full board, a smaller subgroup, community members through a peer selection process? This information should be transparently communicated, and whatever process is used should be applied consistently to all selections. Be explicit about who makes decisions and how, how conflicts of interest will be handled, and how and when applicants will be contacted. No matter the process, prioritize prospective board members' privacy and confidentiality.

If the board itself holds singular final approval, be direct about that. If community members are empowered to make the final selection, the foundation must be prepared to honor their choices, even if they look different from traditional board profiles. A community-informed selection process signals that impacted people are not simply being invited to participate, but trusted to help shape who holds power alongside them. A small, mixed selection committee, including people with lived experience, trusted community partners, and at least one board or staff member, can review candidates together using clear criteria.

Any selection process should include feedback loops and consider how applicants will be in relationship with the foundation as they go through the recruitment or application cycle. Share with unsuccessful candidates why they were not selected, and find other ways to stay connected. To assess equity gaps over time, track who applied, who advanced, and who was chosen. Each round offers the foundation a chance to improve and learn.

A community-informed selection process signals that impacted people are not simply being invited to participate, but trusted to help shape who holds power alongside them.

Compensating board members

Funders should compensate impacted community members for the work they do on the board. While most foundations treat board participation as volunteer service, this practice reflects assumptions about who should serve on a board, and can be a barrier to full participation.

Financial compensation can come in many forms, including as honorarium received as a direct personal payment or as a grant to an organization a board member selects. It can also come in ways intended to free up board members to engage fully in board service. This can include stipends for dependent care or reimbursements for travel, internet, and technology. Whatever the method, be sure to communicate any tax or other implications that accompany the form of payment.

Should only impacted community members receive compensation? We encourage boards to use their power analysis and have frank conversations to discern an appropriate approach — whether that means compensating all board members equally, giving all board members the option to be compensated, or offering compensation exclusively to impacted community members. Any approach will have trade-offs. For example, compensating everyone equally could get expensive, and also not accurately reflect equity values. Compensating only a subset of board members might contribute to feelings of othering and stir judgements among peers.

In addition to financial compensation, foundations can offer professional development opportunities, such as conferences related to the work they fund, spaces to network and learn more about philanthropy, and ongoing learning that deepens ties across the board and staff.

Trillium Foundation offers each board member a payment that can either be received as an individual or directed to an organization.



Compensating board members

Hill-Snowdon Foundation provides non-family community trustees access to learn and build relationships alongside family trustees at conferences and events in the family philanthropy field.



iF, A Foundation for Radical Possibility invests heavily in continuous learning with its board, including bringing in professional facilitation, engaging guest speakers, and organizing book discussions.



Roundhouse Foundation offers all trustees a significant discretionary grant budget and a stipend.



“We want to make sure to limit the barriers for volunteers to participate on our committees. It's a true privilege to volunteer - reserved for those who have time, ability and opportunity to get to meetings, participate in out of office events, and more. Our hope is that stipends and other supports will allow for more people to participate - because their voices matter.”

Erin Borla

Executive Director & Trustee, Roundhouse Foundation

Building New Norms & Practices Together

This is not a routine board refresh; it's an opportunity to shape new power dynamics and structures and co-create a new culture around governance.

Leadership Roles



Making Decisions



Meetings



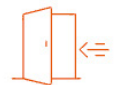
Communication & Conflict



Conflicts of Interest



Accessibility



Building New Norms & Practices Together

This is not a routine board refresh but one that aims to change the board as a whole. It's an opportunity to not simply absorb new members into the existing culture but to co-create it together.* It's essential to pay attention to formal and informal ways that power operates on the board and to shape power dynamics and structures intentionally. With a critical mass of impacted community members in the mix, new and continuing board members can be transparent about how the board currently operates and intentional about shaping what comes next.

* See more at "[Shaping Culture Through Key Moments](#)," Grantmakers for Effective Organizations

Leadership Roles

Acknowledge and be intentional about who holds power. Board officers typically have more authority or power than other board members, as do certain committees, such as the finance, governance, and executive committee. A board serious about shifting power to impacted communities should consider ways that new members can move quickly into these roles, while also scrutinizing the differential power those roles hold.

This is also a good time to re-think leadership as an individual endeavor. Co-leadership or other collective models that distribute leadership may help optimize the opportunity to shift power. Make sure that bylaws or other governing policies don't block these kinds of innovations — and change them if they do!



Building New Norms & Practices Together

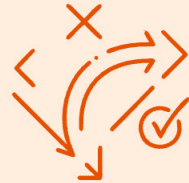
Making Decisions

At minimum, all board members must have full and equal voice and votes on the board.

Given power differentials, some adaptation and creativity might be needed to achieve this. Until and unless impacted community members comprise at least a solid majority, there might be a need to give greater weight to their voices, and perhaps even their votes. For example, rather than staying in plenary for the full meeting, small group discussions could enable fuller participation, generate recommendations, or even have delegated authority to make specified decisions.

These approaches may feel contrary to the democratic process, but on many current boards, some voices already carry more weight, whether because of donor relationships, tenure, or personality type. Sometimes this added influence happens invisibly: A room that looks diverse in personality or background but actually reflects a narrow band of interests can end up giving those interests disproportionate weight in every discussion. A first step in shifting how power operates is to name it and make explicit adjustments to counter implicit ones.

We recommend consensus-based and community-building approaches to decision making, such as by using a tool called the Gradients of Agreement, created by Community at Work. * By replacing a simple yes/no vote with an indication of the degree of support and the reasons why, it unearths perspectives that might otherwise be unheard and leads to more robust discussions and decisions. The approach can also build a shared muscle for centering the voices of impacted community members that can carry over into everyday decision making.

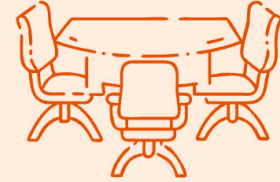


* Gradients of Agreement, [Community at Work](#)

Building New Norms & Practices Together

Meetings

The impetus for rethinking board meetings is to make them more accessible to impacted community members, but even conventional boards could benefit from an overhaul that makes meetings more relevant, enjoyable, and effective for everyone.



Some foundation boards use something akin to Roberts Rules of Order to structure discussions and decisions. Often, there's not full understanding of or fidelity to the process, but nonetheless a sense that order is in order. While structure is not inherently bad, any default structure warrants examination and all structures should be built intentionally to reflect and support a group's purpose and values.

Adopting a consensus decision-making approach opens meetings up to more perspective sharing and creative thinking. Structuring meetings with consent agendas, as BoardSource * recommends, gives the majority of time over to strategic and generative discussion.

As the people around the boardroom change, there's an opportunity to learn from the many ways that impacted community members engage with each other to get all sorts of things accomplished in and for their communities. Undoubtedly, there will be entirely different ways of thinking about how to set the agenda, structure meetings, and make decisions, as well as build relationships, share and co-create cultural rituals, break bread together, and more.

* "Consent Agendas," BoardSource

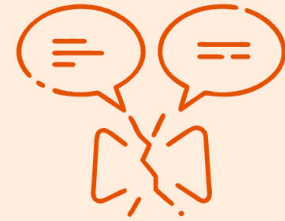
Building New Norms & Practices Together

Communication and Conflict

Boards must ensure that all voices are not just welcomed but genuinely heard and considered, especially those most impacted by the foundation's work. Good facilitation creates space for divergent opinions, a culture of healthy debate, and effective communication across differences.

For many people, conflict conjures images of heated warfare or uncomfortable impoliteness. But conflict is an important window into differences in interests, needs, and perspectives. By suppressing conflict or engaging in it poorly, groups limit their ability to fully understand a challenge or opportunity.

Impacted community members with experience in grassroots organizing or other community-led efforts might have norms and practices to offer for communicating more directly, balancing assertiveness and listening, taking space and making space, and negotiating differences to reach stronger, consensus decisions. Ask new members how they prefer to communicate. Often, these kinds of conversations surface norms that have been operating invisibly. Making them explicit is essential to co-creating the board culture.



Building New Norms & Practices Together

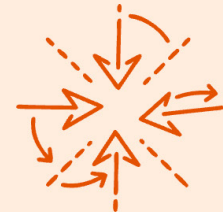
Conflicts of Interest

In the name of managing risk, many conventional boards overly avoid connections with impacted communities, rationalizing it as objectivity. Lived experience and connections are treated as a liability, while the experience and connections of more conventional board members are automatically seen as assets and not as potential conflicts of interests. A foundation that won't consider organizers who advocate for tenants' rights as board members, for example, but allows real-estate developers to serve without scrutiny, is thinking about conflicts too narrowly. Without organizers and others who understand first hand and are accountable to impacted communities in the boardroom, the foundation is less likely to fully value or invest in that work.

Interconnectedness should be treated as an asset, not a disqualifier. People who bring real and sometimes lifelong connections to communities, projects, organizations, and networks tend to be more accountable.

Conflicts will need to be managed across the board without stigmatizing potential conflicts among impacted community members or glossing over potential conflicts among more conventional board members. Transparency is a key element of any conflict of interest policy.

Funders must develop clear policies and ask all board members to regularly review them and disclose potential conflicts. They should also offer training and support, such as around how to mitigate conflicts so they are not a barrier to participation. Be mindful that impacted community members may feel the burden of accountability more acutely, given their closer connections to community, and consider what additional support they might need.



Building New Norms & Practices Together

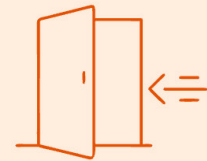
Accessibility

Accessibility means honoring people’s realities and lives, and disability justice is an important framework to integrate in any board. Disability justice moves beyond ADA compliance and towards a more relational and intersectional approach, recognizing access as a collective responsibility and confronting ableism. It asks: Who is participating? Who’s burning out? Who seems reluctant or unable to contribute?

As members join, boards should inquire about access needs to ensure all can fully participate. Funders can interrupt dominant culture norms like long meetings and written materials and encourage multiple ways to contribute that don’t over-privilege those who speak quickly or loudly. Creating more flexible pacing, normalizing rest and silence, and creating a culture of care will strengthen a board overall and benefit everyone.

Accessibility also includes consideration about where and when meetings take place. Begin by asking what works for new members — evenings, weekends, remote options — rather than assuming traditional daytime in-person meetings work for everyone. Ask about location, too, and consider options openly. Community spaces such as library rooms signal inclusion and might be more centrally located than the foundation’s offices.

People with hearing impairments or who communicate more comfortably in languages other than English may feel marginalized and excluded from board opportunities. Interpretation and translation can enable people to participate more fully. It also can push groups to speak in plain language that can be easily understood by diverse members.



Getting Started & Sticking with It

Foundations vary widely in context and approach, yet a core set of elements can support any genuine effort to shift power to impacted communities through governance.

Organizational buy-in and capacity:

Are there key leaders on staff and the board to lead this transformation — and keep it going even when bumps are encountered? This shift will create real work and will need in-house capacity to manage it and keep it moving. Investing in professional facilitation can be invaluable, as can consulting services that ease the added responsibilities of board development that typically fall to the staff.

Openness to culture change and understanding what it entails:

Is the board committed to fully including impacted community members not just in composition but in how it works? This begins with taking stock of the culture, co-creating new norms as a new board, and regularly evaluating and adapting.

Continuous equity learning and practice:

Is the board building a shared power analysis and approaching this change as more than a diversity exercise?

Learning orientation and humility:

Does the board recognize that it doesn't have all the answers? Does it have a culture of learning and honest and direct feedback? A board welcoming impacted community members must be ready to put assumptions and egos aside.

Getting Started & Sticking with It



Reflecting on progress — and future work

Building governance models that welcome and engage impacted community members requires boards to operate differently, creating new modes of engagement and continuous evaluation and improvement.

Questions to keep asking as the board evolves:

Q: Is the culture shifting? Are old patterns being replicated or are new ones being co-created?

Q: Who is participating? Who has influence?

Q: Is community ownership and power, as well as institutional accountability to impacted communities, increasing? Would impacted community members both on and off the board say so?

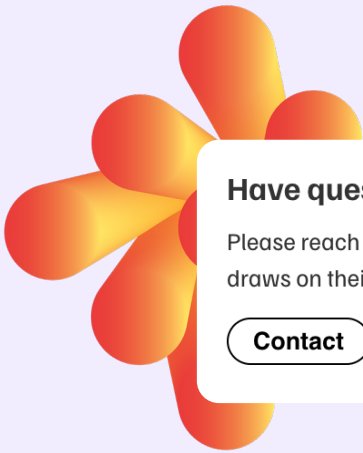
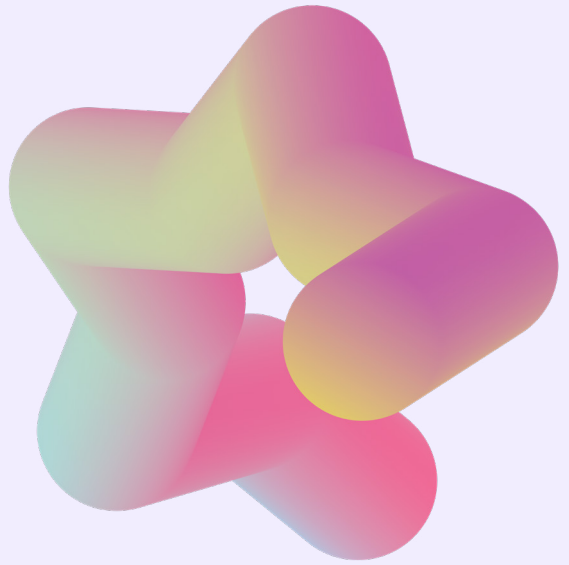
And don't stop there:

Q: What would it take to have a board composed *entirely* of impacted community members?

Beginning with this end in mind, no matter how remote or hypothetical, can push your group's creative thinking and its sense of possibility, boldness, and urgency.

Q: If you reached the goal of having a board composed entirely of impacted community members, what would become possible? What could your foundation achieve, what legacy could it build, and what could communities themselves define, direct, and create with their own assets, expertise, and vision at the center?

The foundation board can not only help advance positive and equitable social impact that benefits impacted communities, but also provide an opportunity to practice true democracy. In this way, funders can be the change that they seek.



Have questions about the toolkit? Or want to learn more?

Please reach out to co-authors Katy Love and Gita Gulati-Pardee. “Community on Board” draws on their collective decades of work with boards and foundations of all types.

[Contact](#)

LISTEN
to **COMMUNITY**