Foundations

# To Change the System, First Change the People

At the Bush Foundation, grantmakers use an analytical approach to identify the right people who can make a difference, and supply them with the tools, connections, and inspiration they need.

By Jen Ford Reedy | Oct. 19, 2017

(https://ssir.org/images/blog/120315nnr278.jpg)

I n nine years as a strategy consultant with McKinsey, I worked with businesses, nonprofits, and governments on issues ranging from affordable housing to marketing motor oil.

I learned to recognize the line between strategy (the clever idea) and implementation (the people doing it). After moving into philanthropy, I quickly realized that the line in my head was in the wrong place. As time went on, I realized that there really was no line at all.



Through its Native Nation Rebuilders program, the Bush Foundation inspires, equips, and connects Native leaders working to strengthen tribal governance. (Photo courtesy of Bruce Silcox)

In philanthropy, you may have money and influence, but you generally have no direct control over the people actually putting the change in place. Philanthropic strategy, therefore, requires that you convince and support other people and organizations to make changes happen.

Most philanthropic interventions involve a bunch of people working to make change with and through a bunch of other people, such as funding an education organization to convince school district leaders to direct principals to coach teachers to engage with students in some new way. It is a chain of human interactions that requires the right motivations, capacities, and coordination at every link.

This is the hardest part of philanthropy, and I have come to believe that our best-odds approach is to develop strategy with this hardest part front and center: How can we inspire, equip, and connect people to make the change we hope to see in the world?

The highest-impact stories in the history of our field, whether you like them or not, have explicitly and fundamentally used this method to achieve their successes. The Green Revolution, for example, was one part scientific research and two parts training and supporting local farmers and agriculture experts. The Law and Economics movement was designed to change the ways lawyers think and, in turn, change policy to support the free market in the United States.

Failures in our field corroborate the theory as well. When philanthropic initiatives break down, it is usually because at least one group of people that was required for success was inadequately inspired, equipped, and connected to do their part.

**The Four Questions**

Informed by our study of philanthropic successes and failures, we've changed how we develop and manage strategy at the Bush Foundation (http://www.bushfoundation.org) , a private independent foundation based in Minnesota. We now frame our work through these four questions:

*1. What is the goal?*

We try to set goals that are broad enough to reflect change in a system's capacity, not just a specific outcome. We think of our work as intervening in an ecosystem–a complex network of people and institutions. Any intervention is going to disrupt relationships and dynamics throughout the ecosystem. (My favorite metaphor for good philanthropy is the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone.) If a goal is construed too narrowly, we run the risk of reaching a goal at the expense of other important goals and relationships in the ecosystem. We also make sure our goal is informed by those directly impacted by a problem, who have both the best intelligence about the ecosystem and the most at stake.

*2. Who is required for success?*

Next, we work to identify the people or groups who are necessary to realize the goal. We identify those people whose minds or practices must be changed, or those who can drive change through institutions and systems. If the goal involves changing the healthcare system, for example, the list would include patients, nurses, doctors, administrators, insurance company representatives, elected officials, and so on.

In philanthropy, our efforts to be strategic may lead us to focus on the systemic—and lose sight of the particular. I have been an eager participant in meetings in which we have "mapped the landscape" and "identified gaps and overlaps" in systems. I see now that, in nearly every case, this exercise led us to a system view and a system intervention that was not well-designed for the human being who is actually trying to navigate or change the institutions and forces represented by our boxes and arrows.

We absolutely believe system change is the goal. But even the biggest and most ambitious social changes are really just changes in the beliefs and actions of lots and lots of people. This isn't about thinking smaller. It's about thinking human.

*3. What do those people need to be inspired, equipped, and connected for success?*

Once we've identified the right people, new questions emerge. For each group, what will provide motivation? What skills and supports do they need? Which connections can help them make changes happen at scale?

In our matrix, each group of people has one row, with three columns: inspire, equip, and connect. We fill in each box with answers to the questions above. If we do it right, the matrix includes everything required for the change to occur.

This analysis helps us identify the interventions that are likely to make the greatest impact. It also shows us where to start. The hope is to find the most efficient way to make the change with the minimum viable intervention.

To do that, we must know which groups of people are critical to success. For example, if an idea to improve neighborhood safety requires trained police officers, supportive community leaders, and engaged parents, we must engage all parties. If we don't engage the parents, it won't work.

We must also identify the type and dosage of the intervention. If the police officers need training, equipment, and at least 10 dedicated hours per week, and we give them training and equipment but only two hours of dedicated time, it won't work.

Finally, we must decide upon the right pace and sequencing. If our intervention requires 100 trained police officers, but only 50 are currently available, we need to build in the time to train 50 additional officers.

Doing this analysis is *hard*. It is much more granular than any strategy work I ever did at McKinsey. It truly bends my brain.

It also makes me realize how casually we often develop strategy in philanthropy, and how prone we are to wishful thinking. We think: If we could just do this one cool thing we are excited about—such as giving every kid an iPad—the other outcomes will just happen. Instead, this analysis forces us to be intellectually honest about what is actually required to make the difference we want to make.

*4. What ecosystem conditions are required for success?*

The people we inspire, equip, and connect both affect and are affected by the ecosystem in which they operate. In all the areas we work, we make complementary investments to make the environment as supportive of change as possible. For example, we give operating support to institutions that provide critical data, advance policy change, or spread smart practices.

Every action we take changes the ecosystem. We must, therefore, continuously learn and adjust our strategy. We must operate inclusively and with humility, to truly understand the disruptions we cause, whether they are good or bad, intentional or unintentional. This is essential to ensure that whatever we do —even if we are wrong and fail—will enrich and not deplete communities.

**The Hard Way**

In our view, the power of this approach is its simplicity, but simple does not mean easy. We are betting on this approach because we believe that what makes it hard is what will make it successful.

This approach reflects how change actually happens. It forces us to be realistic about what is required and how long it will take. And, most importantly, it enables change rather than imposing change, building capacity and ownership within the communities we work. In these ways, we believe it is a highly adaptable and sustainable approach toward impact.

We're still in the early stages of applying this approach but are encouraged by successes so far, on initiatives ranging from Native nation-building to individualizing education. Our founder, Archibald Bush, believed in the power of people, and we've long invested in leadership development as its own program area. This new approach to strategy makes that belief in the power of people central to everything we do to make our region better for everyone.

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