

# How to Show Up in a Trust-Based Way

An overarching value that drives a trust-based approach is cultivating relationships of mutual trust and partnership. This priority on relationships encompasses all six of the trust-based principles, and can be emulated by anyone in any role. Put simply, trust-based philanthropy is not just what you do in policy and practice; it's *how you do it*. There are a number of ways funders can set the tone for more balanced and equitable grantee relationships:

## 1 Clue in to Context

One immediate way to build trust, especially with grantee partners who are on the asking end of the money equation, is to come to the table with an understanding of context. In the nonprofit sector, despite the incredible wealth and resources held by foundations and individual donors, grassroots efforts and organizations led by Black, Latinx and Indigenous leaders struggle to secure funding. In order for funders to be trustworthy, we must examine where our power and privilege intersect within the larger societal context, including how our race, class, gender, education, sexual orientation, immigration status, able-bodiedness and other factors confer social power—or not.

## 2 Create Conditions for Mutual Learning

In relationships between funders and grantees, funders set the terms and tone, modeling rules of engagement, both explicitly and implicitly. The University of Vermont's Matt Kolan suggests that creating conditions for mutually beneficial relationships requires asking permission, listening, honoring what we hear, expressing gratitude, and being open to learning and transformation. What if we approached relationships with our grantee partners this way? Can we get to a place where funders approach grantee relationships with the goal of asking, not, "will I fund them," but, how can I work with you to co-create conditions that enable long-term mutual learning and reciprocity?

## 3 Be Willing to Share Power

Any relationship of trust is inherently a relationship in which each party is equally valued and has influence. When we embody a power-sharing approach, we are willing to name that power imbalance up front and honor the experience, time, ideas, and preferences of our partners. We listen, we check our egos, and we understand our ideas and funding to be additive — not directive — to the work our partners lead.

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*While these tips are predominantly intended for relationships between funders and grantee partners, they can also be applied to relationships between CEOs and staff, between CEOs and trustees, and between grantee partners and communities.*

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## 4 Model Authenticity (Over Performance)

If we don't burden our partners with unrealistic expectations (e.g., *how will you end poverty in 12- 18 months?*), and we are clear from the start that we are in this together to learn, we can nurture relationships that honor complexity. This means: 1) acknowledging that systems change is not easily quantified, and 2) being in the messiness of learning together is how change happens. This leads to another critical point: funders do not have all the answers, or even more of the answers. We are also human, and our strategies and organizations are just as complex and messy as those of our partners. A relationship of shared power means that we are honest about this, that we share our own existential questions, and that we do not stay so attached to being experts or thought leaders.

## 5 Demonstrate Care

Professionalism needs not be divorced from caring, from demonstrating a loving kindness toward the people and the work that calls us to purpose. In relationships of trust, wherein the agreement is to learn together, we care for our partners and feel that they care about us. We learn names and remember where people are from. We ask after the sick baby or parent. We treat our partners as people who have lives and priorities and universes beyond the email reply we are looking for.

## 6 Encourage Wholeness

Philanthropy California's Full Cost Project encourages funding that supports all of the parts of an organization that make social change possible. Instead of viewing overhead as wasteful, people and operational costs are seen as mission-critical. While our funding structures follow such great leads as Full Cost, our relational approaches can embody this understanding in how we relate to our partners. Do we model wholeness ourselves? Do we see others and ourselves as whole people, more than our roles, products, and work outcomes?

Photo courtesy of Disabled and Here



“All social relations are laden with power. Getting out from under dominant power relations and mastering power dynamics is perhaps the most essential skill for change agents across all sectors seeking to ignite positive change in the world.”  
— Cyndi Suarez, *The Power Manual*

This resource was excerpted from a blog post written by Pia Infante, with her permission. To see the original post, visit [www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/blog](http://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/blog).