

CONVERGE LISTENING LABS

APRIL 2021

A CONVERSATION ABOUT RACE & PHILANTHROPY



PREPARED AND PRESENTED BY

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CONVERGE LISTENING LABS



ABOUT OUR WORK

Converge Listening Labs assists clients, who desire to listen responsively, to create a safe space for those who engage their work to share authentic feedback. This feedback informs the client's program design and evaluation processes while helping them build trust and partner effectively with their community.





PROJECT OVERVIEW

The goal of this engagement was to convene purposeful gatherings, Converge Listening Labs (CLL), facilitated by Scotia Moore in partnership with Ashley Dickson Oso. This provided opportunities for Black non-profit leaders to provide feedback to the funding community. Discussions were centered around participant perceptions of **access, process, trust, respect, control, storytelling, and recommendations** related to their experiences with the funding sector.

Solutions are the fruit of connection. As funders and practitioners seek to effectively partner for change in their communities, honest and honoring opportunities to listen and learn from the lived experience of practitioners is not only best practice, but critical to success. This project offered opportunities for listening with a purpose to Black nonprofit leaders engaging the grant-making sector. This builds trust and communicates value; giving the funding community an opportunity for their lives and work to be enriched by the voices of those closest to the community engagement. As a result, the success of funder/practitioner collaboration is strengthened - informing processes, standards of evaluation, and general engagement as it pertains to racial equity.

Utilizing survey results and stated goals for the racial equity work group of Central Oklahoma Funders' Roundtable (COFR), we worked to convene a conversation around racial equity with Black practitioners who engage the grant making process, making space for their lived experience to better inform funder/practitioner partnerships for community good. This report compiles the learnings from two cohorts of participants. All participants received a stipend for sharing their experiences and recommendations in keeping with the best practice of showing value for lived experience and expertise.

TEAM MEMBERS

Scotia Moore

Scotia is a social entrepreneur and consultant through her business, 31 Connections, which seeks to help people connect with purpose, self, others, and place for the common good. She is also the founder and lead facilitator of Converge Listening Labs.

Scotia has 25 years of experience designing and leading programming for children and families as well as a background in arts and advocacy. Scotia is passionate about understanding the life experiences of others and searching out empathetic ways to find common ground and do the “hard work of unity” for the common good. She is currently helping to set culture and to cultivate shared values, shared language, and shared action amongst various city transformation movements including Stronger Together and Flourish OKC.

She and her husband Stephan live in OKC and are the parents of 10 young world-changers.



**"SOLUTIONS
ARE THE
FRUIT OF
CONNECTION."**

TEAM MEMBERS

Ashley Dickson Oso

Ashley Dickson Oso, a native Oklahoman, received her Bachelors of Interpersonal Communications from the University of Central Oklahoma and her Masters of NonProfit Management from the Oklahoma City University.

She currently works as the Programs & Communications Director for the Neighborhood Alliance of Central Oklahoma. There, she has experienced success in a myriad of community revitalization programs and has presented her training, The 10 Commandments of Community Engagement, to a number of University classes and nonprofits as a roadmap to equitable and sustainable change in cities.

Her goal and life's work is to assist cities with creating thoughtful development that provides opportunities for each citizen to experience their best quality of life.



**"THE SECRETS
OF MEN ARE IN
THEIR
STORIES."**

TEAM MEMBERS

Chonta Veal

Chonta Veal is a native of Texas, where she earned her Doctor of Pharmacy from the University of Houston. She has worked as a licensed Pharmacist since 2003, yet her service and expertise extend well beyond her profession.

Chonta's passion lies in partnering with visionary leaders to transition ideas into reality. Through detail oriented work, Chonta provides high level administrative support to her respective clients in an in-depth manner until their desired results are accomplished. The scope of her work crosses the private and public sector, locally as well as nationally.

Chonta and her husband, Jonathan, are owners of Built 2 Bridge Management Group, a service based consulting firm. The two take a team approach, assisting clients in pivoting from where they are to where they desire to be. Chonta and Jonathan currently reside in Oklahoma City with their five children.



**"EXCELLENCE
WITH
INTEGRITY IS
FOUNDATIONAL
TO SUCCESS"**



RACE & PHILANTHROPY BY THE NUMBERS

GIVEN TO PARTICIPANTS AS A POINT OF DISCUSSION

- On average, revenues of black led organizations are **24%** smaller than of their white-led counterparts.
- The unrestricted net assets of black led organizations are **76%** smaller than white-led counterparts.
 - Disparity increases to **45%** smaller revenues and **91%** unrestricted funds for male black leaders.
- **72%** of leaders of color have board members who did not raise money compared to **64%** of white leaders.
- **63%** of leaders of color lack access to individual donors compared to **49%** of white leaders.
- **51%** of leaders of color lack access to foundations versus **41%** of white leaders.
- Only **25%** of family foundations use formal diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies as guides for giving.
- **92%** of US foundations have a white president, **83%** of the full-time executives are white, **68%** of program officers are white.

DISCUSSION TOPICS & PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

THIS SECTION INCLUDES DISCUSSION CATEGORIES AND THE PARTICIPANT RESPONSES GATHERED OVER TWO DAYS



“

WHAT IF WE
(FUNDERS AND
PRACTITIONERS)
DREAMED
TOGETHER?

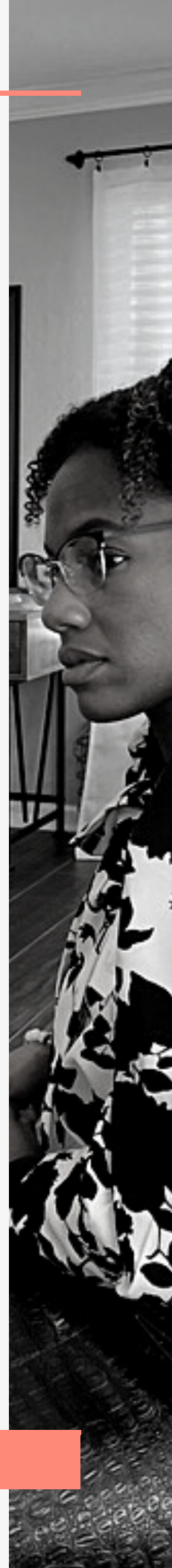


DISCUSSION TOPICS & PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

ACCESS

PARTICIPANTS WERE ASKED TO DESCRIBE THE ACCESSIBILITY TO GRANTS AND FUNDERS

- There was a pervasive sentiment that access to funders/funding entities is problematic. "You must know someone on the inside in order to gain access and/or to be taken seriously."
- Feelings of degradation: Participants expressed that they must be accompanied/endorsed by a white "co-signer" to be trusted or even secure a meeting. They felt overlooked, spoken past, and degraded during those meetings.
- Funding seems to flow more freely where there is a relationship between the practitioner and the funder. Unfortunately, many relational circles are homogenous.
- "I'm working two jobs just to stay afloat; I don't have time to build relationship."
- "Having to build relationship before being funded is a challenge. while we are still building relationship my organization has gone under."
- "Knowing someone (or seeing someone involved that looks like me) is a factor in whether I even try to apply for funding."
- Constantly feeling the need to name-drop to the funding gatekeeper.
- There is a language and culture in the funding world that is native to those who have grown up in that culture. Foundation leaders grew up together, went to the same schools, same neighborhoods, similar economic background.
- There has been a lack of attention to black-led organizations until recently. There is concern that this attention will be short-lived.
- Philanthropists don't seem to want to fund systemic things, they want to fund Band-Aids.
- Representation Matters. There was enthusiasm about applying for Black Justice Fund (BJF). It seemed possible to be funded because there was representation on the evaluation team.



DISCUSSION TOPICS & PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

PROCESS

PARTICIPANTS WERE ASKED TO SHARE THEIR PERCEPTION OF THE GRANT SEEKING PROCESS

- Feels like trying to navigate a sector that is foreign and difficult without a map, but it's necessary for survival.
- Feels overwhelming, cumbersome, futile, arduous, complicated, and not the best use of time. We need grant writers, but can't afford a dedicated person.
- There is lack of clarity about what the funders actually value and fund, lack of scoring rubric, and lack of feedback if you apply but don't get funded.
- The process feels like we're being picked apart and evaluated, It's not relational, and there's lots of anxiety around trying to make the perfect pitch, tell the perfect story, etc. because the stakes feel so high. Survival is at stake.
- "I try to keep in mind that funders are a resource, but God is ultimately my source."
- There seems to be a "bro code" . . . seeing large amounts given to white counterparts who are still in ideation phase yet no demonstrated success.
- Grant writing/best practice seminars are expensive and even when we learn best practices, we don't have the funds or staff needed to follow through.
- There needs to be a major shift toward the Black Justice Fund approach (streamlined application process, black representation, etc.).

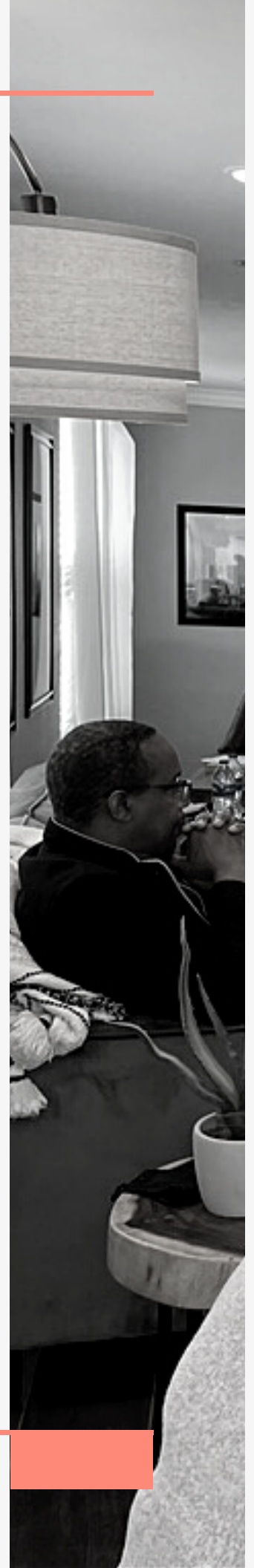


DISCUSSION TOPICS & PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

TRUST

PARTICIPANTS WERE ASKED TO DISCUSS BUILDING MUTUAL TRUST BETWEEN FUNDERS AND PRACTITIONERS

- "Trust is reflected by honoring my decision-making authority; being given unrestricted funds, trusting that I know what I'm talking about when I speak on issues of race."
- "Trust me to know what my community needs."
- Trust is built through authentic relationships.
- Understand that white leaders have a leg up when it comes to being funded.
- "Value my un-degreed expertise."
- Trust is reflected in "big win" investments.
- Consistency and long-term commitments from funders builds trust with practitioners.
- "Let me be me, let me talk the way I talk. Expand your definition of professionalism. Let me keep my dignity."
- "I trust funders who are direct. Tell me if I'm leaving more to be desired. Tell me how to win. I distrust funders who require unnecessary information or involvement in what I'm doing."
- "I had someone literally communicate that it would be wise to bring my white board members to fundraising meetings."
- "When they ask me who's on my board, I feel distrusted. It's almost as if my vision and work isn't enough. I feel trusted when they speak openly about their funding goals, how much they intend to spend on certain missions, and when they introduce me to their peers."

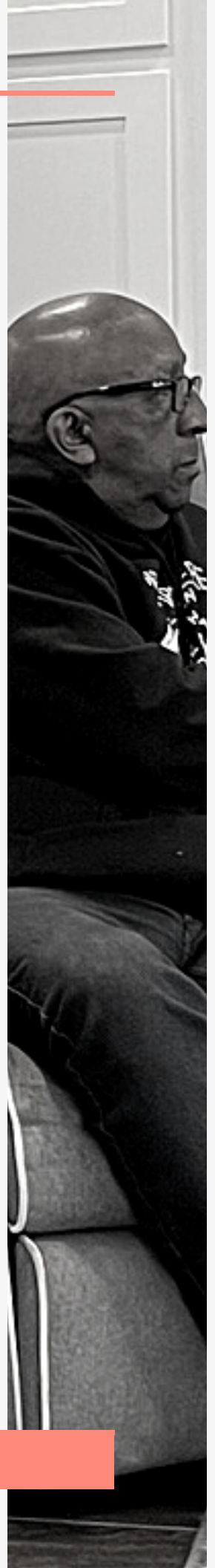


DISCUSSION TOPICS & PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

CONTROL/RESPECT

PARTICIPANTS SHARED EXPERIENCES WITH FUNDERS RELATED TO CONTROL AND RESPECT.

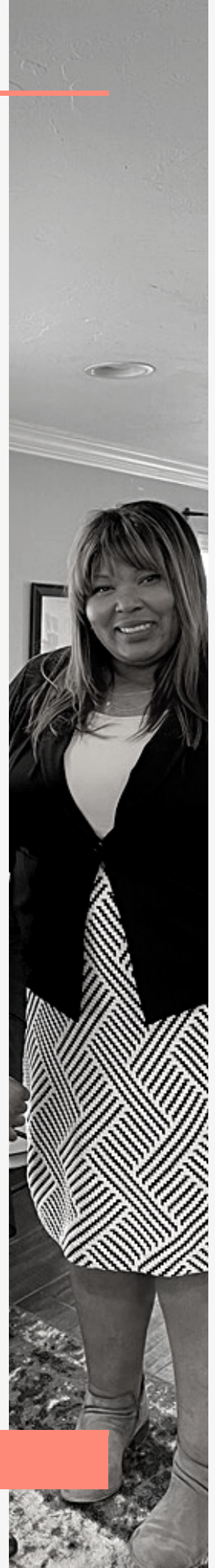
- Participants described multiple instances of being threatened by funders and social media stalked, culminating in funding being pulled when they would not be silent about issues of race.
- Participants described the indignity of being told what to wear, how to speak, or how to sit in meetings by funders.
- There was constant pressure to code switch: "being told to 'correct' ones hair. Being told to wear clothes that don't actually reflect the work I do to make funders feel more comfortable. Lastly, always being asked my age. 100% of the time I'm asked my age due to my young appearance and the presumption of inexperience, in spite of the valuable content that I'm sharing."
- "I've felt pressured to code switch the entire 15 years that I've been serving the community. Talk differently, dress differently, smile more, correct my hair, etc. I have felt pressured to bury the things that make me authentically me due to my culture and upbringing even though those changes don't directly impact my work. It's simply for the comfort of those in certain spaces."
- We shouldn't be expected to have to give our expertise for free.
- Lack of trust is a bi-product of the problem: counter-productive (though natural) "tribalism", lack of cross-cultural relationships, and historic racial bias.



DISCUSSION TOPICS & PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

CONTROL/RESPECT (CONT.)

- On being asked to change in order to be funded: "Big time. I've been asked to change language. I've been asked to dissolve my nonprofit and come under a more established (white-run) organization. I've been asked to even change the name of my main project so that it would 'make more sense' to fund."
- "Another thing is feeling like they [funders] have to send their people to come help just to confirm it's real. I've been told by a few funders that they will only support things they can send their staff/church members to. But I don't need your people. I need your funds. We have our own people."
- "Funding partners need to be willing to submit to our leadership and knowledge in doing the work."
- "I have reduced my nonprofit involvement because the structure (and interactions with funders) makes me feel like a beggar."
- Other comments on the topic of respect: "Constantly pitching your ideas on top of mine (and still not providing funds). Recommending me to connect to someone who not only isn't from my community, but is out of touch. 'You should talk to _____ and see what they're doing about this problem'.... Even though those people have only been around for a couple of years/months. They just have the privilege of relationships that got them funded quickly. Ghosting me without reason is very disrespectful. To stop responding without reason for months at a time, and then, when we're in public, I'm expected to smile and give you pointless updates. I don't feel like I have the freedom to deal with them accordingly due to possibly being labeled as an immature, angry black man, or just being blackballed behind closed doors."



DISCUSSION TOPICS & PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

STORYTELLING

PARTICIPANTS DISCUSSED THE NEED FOR CARE AROUND HOW COMMUNITY STORIES ARE TOLD

- “In the past, I have felt pressure to share stories that highlight the worst version of my community. I have refused to strip the dignity of the individuals I serve by using this practice. The only stories shared will be told by those who WANT to share their story.”
- "Our communities are bleeding out, we will not applaud tokenism, and mere photo-ops etc."
- It doesn't seem like funders are interested in funding upstream solutions, only the stories of "feeding people" seem to get traction. Work that is attempting to help the community to stand on its own feet with dignity and economic viability feels overlooked. "Stop thinking of people as broken."
- There is mostly a problem-centered approach toward and perspective of the community that seems valued by funders rather than a strengths-centered approach.



PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDATIONS

- Examine your assumptions.
- Reverse the expectation for us to impart our wisdom for free.
- Empower us to be gatekeepers, not tokens or Trojan horses.
- Create a “toolbox” for funders interested in working with Black-led nonprofits and in the Black community.
- Make orientation a best practice. For example: use the module created by Black Space that explains the history of the black community in Oklahoma. This historical orientation would help funders to learn and understand the reasons for racial tension/anger and would build understanding of why funds need to go upstream.
- Build a pool of free/affordable support services for Black-led nonprofits including but not limited to consulting, legal services, accounting services, group health insurance, grant writing etc. that bring down the costs for the nonprofit and allows them to have margin to focus more on the work.



- Bring in diverse representation on all levels of the funding org. (Board, Staff, etc.).
- Create a division with a dedicated staff person (of color) to find and support black-led nonprofits and businesses and to serve as an advisor/consultant to the funding sector. Give this person or team a pool of funds to disperse along with decision-making authority.
- Continue BJF and have someone of color as an ED of an agency.
- Have transparent rubrics for evaluation.
- Give multi-year support for work so that they are not under the stress of constant financial crisis of fundraising just to survive.

PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDATIONS (CONT.)

- Participate in some sort of open house geared toward black-led nonprofits to build relationships and to be aware of funding opportunities.
- Develop and fund a pipeline for the next generation of Black leaders.
- Hire more consultants and bridge builders.
- Understand and support the reality that the community has a connection to the built environment and historically black spaces. Their removal and displacement isn't just "making room for progress". It feels like being devalued and erased, especially when there is no community voice to inform development and little to no Black representation.
- Archive, fund, and listen to our storytelling. This is important in order to heal.
- Choose a dozen black leaders to push over the top toward success, market them, support them, resource them to resource others in the community.
- "What if we decided we were equal and acted like it?"
- Lament the horror, trauma, abuse, and system-induced pain.
- Several participants expressed a desire for continued conversation, including participating in a Converge Listening Lab that includes funders and strategic, co-created next steps.



CONSULTANT OBSERVATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Better Together



The participants in this Converge Listening Lab were all very engaged and represented a variety of sectors. The time achieved the goal of providing a safe space to process and to give feedback. There were stories that were painful to hear but far more painful to live, and space was given during the Lab for authentic expression regarding the good and bad experiences as a Black nonprofit leader interacting with the funding sector. There was a mix of pessimism regarding responsiveness and hopeful expectation of new possibilities regarding funders and practitioners partnering effectively.

There is tremendous opportunity for growth in building accessible onramps both in process and access, building mutual trust and respect, and for meaningful partnership that acknowledges the lived experience and expertise of practitioners while also acknowledging the unique challenges of being a Black leader. This is best done with consistency, attention to the power of representation, and with the investment of funds in a way that includes evaluation criteria and measurements of success that are co-created with Black leaders and the community impacted by the work.

CONSULTANT OBSERVATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Better Together

The participant recommendations mirror some of our own. Additionally, We recommend a different approach when considering funding for Black led organizations that includes:

- An awareness that Black leaders reflect and identify with the communities they serve. It is an affront to expect them to share stories that cast them and those they serve in a constant posture of undignified dependence. Shifting perspective toward seeking out and funding possibility, as well as problem-solving is needed, supporting upstream solutions.
- When speaking of Black-led nonprofits, people are the program. These leaders and their staff bring their whole selves, often sacrificially, to the work. They should not be considered “overhead” or “administrative cost” but rather the source from which the fountain of creative solutions and effective programming flows. These leaders build the bridges of trust in the communities they serve. They must often choose between making a living and making a difference. In an effort to do both, they are commonly working a full-time job and doing their underfunded passion work (nonprofit) as a second nearly full-time role, often with insufficient, little, or no compensation. We recommend intentionality and investment around their support, and the minimization of administrative services that bog them down in the hands on, direct service work that motivates them while also respecting and following their leadership in that work.
- 87% of African Americans identify as affiliated with religion, yet many foundation and corporate giving excludes faith-based community initiatives. We recommend reconsideration of these policies as they discriminate against Black nonprofit leaders whose faith motivates their work and sustains them. We recommend that funders find common ground in faith-based work that aligns with their priorities as well as creating policies that allow Black leaders to bring their whole selves to their work.

CONSULTANT OBSERVATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Better Together

- Our team has observed the weighty experience of Black nonprofit leaders. This weight takes a toll on physical/mental health, family, and personal finances. We recommend funding opportunities for refreshment, rest, and encouragement for these leaders, their staff, and their families (who often sacrificially share in the work).
- Lastly, we recommend continued contexts for listening, trust-building and connection between funders and practitioners. It is our hope that this will lead to more effective partnership to catalyze the good we all want to see and experience in our city, state, and nation.



"One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say."

-Bryant H. McGill