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When a Grantmaker is a Facilitative Leader by Curtis Ogden, Interaction Institute for Social Change

"Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it.
Boldness has genius, magic and power in it.
Begin it now."

-Wolfgang von Goethe

The immensity and complexity of today's social and environmental challenges is requiring the field of philanthropy to redefine its role in social problem solving and calling upon those who work in the field to transform their thinking and approach to grantmaking. The good news is that there are numerous examples of innovation in the field, embodied in the persons and practices of change agents who are quietly and concertedly working to alter philanthropic practice and help nonprofits achieve better results.

Over the past year, GEO's **Change Agent Project** has reaffirmed what many have known for a long time – foundation practices are rooted in a history, philosophy and power dynamic that often prevent grantmakers from building meaningful relationships with and optimizing their support of grantees. Participants in focus groups and interviews conducted by GEO and the Interaction Institute for Social Change through the spring and summer of 2006 voiced concern that these practices are now threatening to render philanthropy irrelevant to the cause of social change.

Anyone Can Be an Agent of Change

Philanthropy's change agents operate in many different roles and occupy a variety of organizational positions. They include trustees, CEOs, program officers, evaluation directors, philanthropic intermediaries and consultants. Generally speaking, the focus of these change agents' efforts fall into three spheres – their own organizations, their work with grantees on issues of shared concern, and the foundations' leadership roles in the world.

Across all of these spheres of activity, there are those who know the power of collective voice and collaborative action and who are driven by their desire and ability to tap the participation of those with whom they work to achieve greater social impact. These grantmakers operate as and demonstrate many of the characteristics of "facilitative leaders."

Understanding Facilitative Leadership

The Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC) centers its training and consulting practices around *Facilitative Leadership*®, a collaborative model of leadership that aims to inspire and create the conditions that help people step into their own power and to work together to achieve a common goal. IISC Executive Director Marianne Hughes characterizes facilitative leaders first and foremost as long distance runners. "They take the long view and are often engaged in the work for the long haul," explains Hughes. "They persist and they persevere."

Furthermore, says Hughes, facilitative leaders are, "at their core, values-driven, sustained by a deep faith in people's abilities, a belief in others' goodness and capacity for change." With this fundamental values-based orientation, facilitative leaders demonstrate a number of critical attributes. They are:

- *Strategic* They keep in mind and remind others of the "big picture," ensuring that collective attention is focused on high leverage issues and activities.
- *Self-aware* They are mindful of and committed to reflecting on the ways in which their personal values, background, feelings, thoughts, and social/organizational contexts impact their behaviors.
- Receptive They actively encourage others to contribute, accept others' ideas and perceptions, and receive feedback in a non-defensive way.
- Flexible They adjust their plans to meet changing needs and in response to the feedback they receive.
- *Humble* They understand that they do not have, nor do they have to have, all of the answers.

In addition, facilitative leaders are skillful practitioners, possessing an adaptive toolkit upon which they draw to engage others and collectively move towards shared goals. They are able to think about and measure success in multi-dimensional ways, including results, process and relationships. They are able to convene others and facilitate their thinking, drawing out the best ideas and those of often overlooked stakeholders. They are skilled in helping others to create shared visions and enthusiasm for possibility, and they are able to spread the infectiousness of good ideas that yield innovation.

How Grantmakers Can Affect Change

So what does or can *philanthropic* facilitative leadership look like in action? Examples include:

- Foundation leadership going on a listening campaign to get input from communities state-wide in establishing funding priorities and programs.
- Trustees, executive director, and staff members making it a point to meet regularly, compare notes and learn from one another's perspectives and experiences.
- Program officers engaging in peer coaching with one another and their grantees in an environment that encourages people to share their challenges and collaboratively generate solutions.
- A family foundation putting resources into convening community stakeholders to collectively design a vision and strategy around "at-risk" children.
- A large foundation streamlining communication processes and feedback mechanisms in order to build and maintain relationships.

In the quote that heads this article, Goethe speaks of the "genius, magic and power" of "boldness." Boldness is at the heart of each and every philanthropic change agent who has demonstrated the courage it takes to begin to think and act differently and, in the case of facilitative leaders, to engage the participation of others in the often messy and necessarily collective pursuit of a more just and sustainable world. Their example and leadership invite us all to "begin it now."