

Sponsored Supplement
The Pillars of Partnership
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The Pillars of Partnership

When funders and grantees are aligned on mission and trust one another, lasting change stands a chance.

✿ BY BARBARA ANDERSEN

In business, the idea is to align everyone toward the same profit-driven goal. One would think that foundations and their grantees would share a similar mentality—after all, aren't we all driven to eradicate social ills?

Well, maybe, or then again, maybe not. Foundations and grantees are sometimes aligned only in the broadest sense. Drill down a level or two, and you will often discover competing priorities. That's because although a funder may prioritize one issue—say, emergency readiness—and allocate resources to making progress on that front, potential grantees are almost always already working to achieve their own organizational missions, which may not completely overlap with that of the funder. Unfortunately, some nonprofits will pivot to access additional resources even if doing so compromises their own goals.

The situation, though, suggests an important difference between everyday grantees and true partners. A grantee provides a service or operates a program that is aligned with a funder's priorities. Partners already share the funder's vision, and are even more motivated to achieve their goals with the additional funding support. Ideally, the funder and grantee collaborate to articulate a shared vision, improve how they work as they adapt to each other's approach, and inspire buy-in from additional stakeholders.

At The Orfalea Fund, we aspired to that ideal. We sought partners in all aspects of our work, from responsive grantmaking to strategic initiatives. As a small foundation with limited staff and finite resources, we knew that working in partnership would not always be the most comfortable option. But we also knew that partnerships would be essential to achieving the social change we sought.

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It wasn't easy. We experienced many challenges in initiating and sustaining partnerships, and found it necessary to develop a framework to assess our current partners and vet future partners, and guide us during the inevitable rough spots of developing and sustaining relationships. We called our framework the Six Pillars of Partnership, and we share it here in the hopes that others will find it as useful as we have. (See "The Six Pillars of Strategic Partnership" below.)

Our pillars aren't earth-shattering; some of them may even seem common sense. But we have seen firsthand that common sense is sometimes blinded by naiveté and hope—or by narrow thinking and funder interest. We have learned that funders need to be honest and transparent about their expectations for

the short and long term, and so do the nonprofits they support. If that transparency does not exist, neither party can be expected to adapt to the other's evolving situation, perspective, and needs. Communication is essential to building trust, and building trust is paramount in developing mutually beneficial partnerships.

As the fund approaches its sunset we are ever more mindful about how we communicate with our partners, create mutual expectations for success, maintain trust with and empower our colleagues, and ensure that our investments can continue to demonstrate value and be leveraged well into the future. It is a bittersweet but gratifying role to be in as we watch our partners take full ownership of our co-created vision. ✕

The Six Pillars of Strategic Partnership

An effective partnership...

- 1. Reforms ineffective and/or inefficient systems** | We engage in partnerships to build scale and continuity otherwise unattainable on our own, to solve problems others either do not see or are unwilling to tackle.
- 2. Aligns with and advances the missions of all partners** | We ensure alignment of interests and values to reduce doubt and improve trust essential to risk-taking.
- 3. Fosters an entrepreneurial approach to problem-solving** | We form partnerships to achieve what has not been done before, requiring creativity, adaptability, bold action, and an attitude of possibility and embracing challenges.
- 4. Leverages strengths specific to engaged parties** | We choose partners whose knowledge, capacity, and experience are complementary and targeted to achieving the desired outcomes, and who are willing to learn and make adjustments along the way.
- 5. Focuses on building stakeholder empowerment** | We leverage existing strengths, build new skills, provide educational opportunities, and build pathways of success for beneficiaries by accessing current data and resource experts in the field to build on the overall stakeholder body of knowledge.
- 6. Commits to the attainment of visible, measurable results** | We work with our partners to develop a continuous improvement cycle, in which all partners use both data and empirical observation to refine strategies and assess progress. We are committed to explaining what was accomplished so others may take up the challenge in their own communities. We are open to honest assessments of what works and what doesn't, and to making improvements along the way.