The Future of Philanthropy
Is Trust-Based
Sponsored by Trust-Based Philanthropy Project

Building a Multiracial Democracy
By Pia Infante

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other staff, requires the same trust and collaboration internally that we seek to build externally in our relationships with the community. The premium is on listening, compromise, sharing power, and recognizing the wisdom of the collective.

Another area of change is our board dockets. As at other foundations, the docket became a way for program staff to demonstrate value and expertise; the longer and more detailed their memos, the more they felt they were being respected and heard. But we realized that the opposite was the case: The memos were indigestible. More important, they were symptoms of an academic, transactional approach to grantmaking that prioritized process over impact and lobbying the board over learning with them. As a result, the docket has become shorter, focusing on elevating major themes across issues and grants. For staff and board members, this shift has clarified the intersections of our work as well as our mission. The board transitioned from approving grants individually to approving them as a slate.

FROM OPERATIONALIZING TO TRANSFORMING

We discovered that our grantmaking needed an overhaul to better align with our values and give our partners more room to do their work, experiment, invest, and win.

The Endeavor Fund is our most significant philanthropic investment to date. We awarded $3.5 million each to seven leading nonprofit organizations over seven years, for a total investment of $24.5 million, with the aim of closing the racial and gender wealth gap. This multiyear initiative enables organizations led by people of color to determine the best ways to deepen and grow to change systems. We acknowledge and encourage the importance of investing in organizational capacity, including worker pay and professional development.

Multiyear unrestricted grants are still not the norm. Even for those who embrace a multiyear approach, the average term is two to three years. Allison recalls being at a grant maker conference years ago and watching the audience members’ jaws drop when Pia Infante, a senior fellow at the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, proposed that future grant periods be 10 years. “The shock for the audience—myself included—tells me how critical it is for funders to push ourselves and one another to share the ideas we have not yet seen proven, especially when our nonprofit partners are telling us what they need to do their work.”

The conventions of status quo philanthropy—working in programmatic silos, imposing rigid requirements that overly rely on transactions, written proposals, and reports—once offered predictability in our grantmaking cycles, comfort in our positional power, and recyclable templates. They required less of us and, in turn, resulted in less impact and fulfillment. Our work today requires us to be active, engaged partners, and our relationships are rooted in trust, not control. Our accountability is to all our partners—our community, staff, and board.

During our journey to operationalize trust, we continue to learn lessons about what this work requires. Rather than a hard pivot, operationalizing trust can be an evolution. This transformation is well worth the effort if our goal is to bring about change and support our nonprofit partners to build a more equitable, trust-based future.

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BUILDING A MULTIRACIAL DEMOCRACY

The practices of trust-based philanthropy require grappling with deep-rooted inequities while living values in action.

BY PIA INFANTE

Philanthropy is crucial to sustaining and strengthening democracy, now more than ever. Trust-based philanthropy, like democracy, happens through practice. Both require commitment, rigor, and adaptivity. As this supplement has shown, some philanthropic leaders and institutions are exercising democratic, trust-based practices that could contribute to a more manifest multiracial democracy in our time.

If funders understand our collective goal to be strengthening and sustaining democracy, especially as democracy has come under attack around the world, trust-based philanthropy has a major role to play. To illustrate the connection between an embodied practice of democracy and trust-based philanthropy, I highlight the work of three powerful leaders: Brenda Solorzano, a trust-based funder in Montana; Aria Florant, a movement leader bringing reparations and repair to the work of philanthropy; and Kierra Johnson, the executive director of a national LGBTQ+ justice nonprofit.

Invest in community wisdom. As the inaugural CEO of the Headwaters Foundation, Brenda Solorzano led a democratic process to build a trust-based foundation in Montana. She began by listening to others. In what she refers to as the 600 Cups of Coffee Tour, she worked her way across western Montana to talk to communities about their lives. For Solorzano, the tour’s purpose was about “having frank conversations with the people of Montana—city officials, tribal communities, health workers, childcare providers, parents, and nonprofit leaders—about health-related issues that were most important to them.” Communities shared their desire for the foundation to “go upstream” to address the root causes of poverty and poor health outcomes among Montanans, and to build more collaboration between organizations and across sectors.

With a committed board and staff that viewed the foundation as a community resource, Headwaters developed a democratic ethos through a trust-based framework. Across differences of perspective, identity, priorities, and history, Headwaters collaborated with nonprofit partners to support community-defined interventions that have contributed to better health outcomes in western Montana. Solorzano’s work represents how funders are forging in building institutions committed to the practice of democracy and trust-building.

Trust requires truth-telling. “When we think of power as only something that’s likely to abuse us, we often become so counter-dependent on it that we forget our own agency in that scenario. This is actually part of the recipe for authoritarianism,” says Aria Florant, cofounder and CEO of Liberation Ventures.

Florant has worked to help social sector and philanthropic leaders understand the importance of reclaiming our individual and collective
power. For Florant, our ability to remake our relationship to power, including financial power, is critical to building a multiracial democracy. “When power can show up differently in the form of trust-based philanthropy,” Florant says, “it makes space for those who have perceived themselves to not have power to feel more of their power and to start to construct relationships that are built on so much more.”

As Florant and others have indicated, building a future where money and resources are equitably shared cannot happen without reckoning with the past. Laura Gerald, the president of the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, recently shared that “there is no trust without truth.” Gerald’s call mirrors growing efforts in the sector to encourage donors and funders to examine philanthropy’s history as a product of racial capitalism. There can be no trust-based future without reckoning with the reality that philanthropy exists because of structural inequities.

The work of grappling with the sources of foundation wealth requires both humility and courage, but it is required if our aim is to break inequities once and for all. Luckily, Florant and her collaborators have created a reparations road map that could model shifts beyond philanthropy to make federal-level reparative change. **Realize that the future is our responsibility.** Trust-based philanthropy allows funders to share power, collaborate, and learn from social-movement leaders such as Kierra Johnson, the executive director of the National LGBTQ Task Force. When asked what it would look like if trust-based philanthropy were the norm, Johnson responded that nonprofits and social movements would finally “shift from thinking of ourselves as an identity-based movement to one that is building our democracy—where we are instrumental in infrastructural and cultural solutions to the problems in this country and not having to focus solely on just surviving.”

At the center of Johnson’s work is an intersectional analysis. Without recognizing connections between our often-siloed work, Johnson says, funders and nonprofits provide piecemeal solutions rather than “harnessing our collective power to change the fabric of democracy.” We do not have to look very far to see the interconnected nature of issues or imagine how more intentional alignment would make our work more effective.

The message from Johnson and other movement leaders is clear: Funders need to use our resources and our imaginations to set the conditions for trust. Only then can we achieve structural and cultural change.

In trust-based philanthropy, funders are saying “I trust you” to the communities we serve, many of whom the political, social, and economic systems have consistently failed. Johnson calls on funders to “show us you believe communities have the power to shape society, to build a democracy that we’ve never seen before.”

**PRACTICING DEMOCRACY**

The ultimate work of trust-based philanthropy is to build a democracy that acknowledges the role of structural racism in the creation of wealth in the United States. One where decision-making takes place in communities rather than behind foundation doors. A democracy that is a daily practice emphasizing the connections between our work and the solutions that collaboration makes possible.

Like democracy, trust-based philanthropy is strengthened through practice. Its impact only grows when it’s implemented collectively. I am grateful to Brenda Solorzano, Aria Florant, Kierra Johnson, the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project staff and steering committee, and our many other colleagues who have helped evolve and strengthen this approach with generosity, humility, and conviction.

My fierce hope is that these models and others weave together to help build a strong, multiracial democracy and trust-based future.

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