

What's Your Strategy for Change? Try Ours.

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[Link](#)

If you missed our workshop at the National Center for Family Philanthropy's Leadership Retreat in Park City in November, read on for our framework for managing change within philanthropies that will limit friction and build excitement. At the end of this article, we include a worksheet to help you plan for change.

Over the years, we've found that leaders who are responsible for driving change within their philanthropies are often blindsided by unanticipated impacts. Whether it's transitions in leadership or strategy, receipt of a large bequest, or once-in-a-generation external factors like major policy shifts, a global pandemic, or a racial justice reckoning, navigating seismic changes requires deft leadership, planning, and a lot of clear communication.

As philanthropic leaders in our prior lives and today as advisors, we've led many organizations through times of transition, and have seen firsthand that there's a tremendous amount at stake. Done right, every stakeholder, from board members to staff to grantees, feel bought in and excited. Done wrong, there's potential to leave stakeholders confused and disempowered.

In order to ensure smooth transitions with less frustration and more excitement, unity, and momentum, you have to go slow to go fast. That means pausing to create a holistic plan of action that allows you to live your organization's values through the entire change management process. Then, once you share your plan, things move more smoothly because everyone's in the loop.

It's easier to accomplish than you might think. Here are our three key steps that every philanthropy should consider as they navigate changes, large or small.

1. Don't underestimate the challenge.

Identifying and acknowledging tensions that may arise from change actually makes them more manageable. As you do so, consider how issues of power, control, and equity determine who typically informs and makes decisions. Treat this as an opportunity to examine your current process while seeking out ways to create more equity and better outcomes going forward.

Change management also requires deliberate planning, time, and forethought – it's not a marginal activity leaders can easily slip into their existing schedules and mental load. Instead, it should be treated as central to the organization's success.

So before you even begin the process of discussing or implementing a potential change, take stock of what challenges may be ahead. Assign a person to manage the change process, articulating what they will be responsible for and their time allocation. Consider what will be needed to drive the change, such as resourcing for activities like team retreats, where facilitators can guide discussions and help surface tensions and opportunities during the change process – and even broker discussions about decisions as the organization moves through the change.

Ask these questions:

- What tensions will the change cause and why?
- How will others experience the change?
- Who should be included in the decision-making process and what are their roles?

2. Replace top-down decision making with co-developing.

We're often involved in scaling philanthropies where the experience (such as having more money to grant) should be positive. Yet we've seen how confusing and disheartening it can be for staff or grantees when changes to how the increased funding will be deployed aren't fully thought through, especially when it comes to who will be impacted. For example, a philanthropy receiving a large infusion from their founder may decide not to grow staff but instead give bigger dollars away to more mature nonprofits, with potentially huge implications for smaller ones. Lack of clarity surrounding what's changing and why can leave some stakeholders feeling left out, unconsidered, and unsure of their future.

Top-down decision making also has the potential to undermine any equity work your organization has done. People often default to old habits of efficiency and control, yet there is a chance to more deliberately consider who should have input into the change and who should make which decisions. Stop to consider whether the default "decider," who is often the person at the top, is actually the best person to make the decision. Your staff or community are often disproportionately impacted by leadership's decisions, so it's critical to include these stakeholders in decision making. Not only does that avoid a feeling of "They say they're about equity and inclusion, but I'm going to be hugely impacted by this change and no one even bothered to speak with me," but by listening to more people with diverse perspectives and experiences, you'll also likely learn ways to make the process better for everyone.

For example, we recently worked with a philanthropy that was hiring a new leader. After years of top-down hiring, which had led to high turnover and low morale, they agreed to let us design a hiring process that involved more of their team's input. While it did take longer, it gave them a chance to hear more about what their team needed to be successful and allowed them to bring in strong candidates they may have overlooked otherwise. The result: after co-developing the hiring process, they now have a leader that not only the board approves of, but their entire community is excited to rally behind.

Ask these questions:

- Are we co-creating the change management process with our staff and grantees?

- Can we involve them in more of our decisions?
- Are the voices and opinions of stakeholders – including the communities we serve – heard and acted on?

3. Create a clear communication strategy.

Next it's time to share the upcoming changes. It's in a leader's best interest to be explicit with stakeholders about why a change is occurring and, equally as important, what that change may mean for each stakeholder. If you're thinking, "Well, surely everyone will understand," we'll stop you right there, because that's usually not the case.

People have an intrinsic desire to understand what a change will mean for them with as many specifics provided as possible. When there's change in funding strategy, for instance, staffers are often concerned about whether their expertise will still apply or if they'll be out of a job; current grantees will worry what it means for their funding; a new pool of potential grantees will wonder if they'll suddenly qualify. So! Many! Feelings!

[Empathy maps](#) are a great way to anticipate and address potential emotions. By putting each stakeholder (board member, grantee, staffer) at the center of a diagram, you ask the three questions below and come away with specific, clear ways a change may impact not only how they work, but how they might view your organization.

Ask these questions:

- What are stakeholders feeling?
- What are they seeing?
- What are they thinking?

Once you see how different groups are affected, you'll better understand how they're going to experience the transition and can identify opportunities for you to anticipate their concerns – and create a transparent communication plan that addresses those concerns head on.

Yes, change can be challenging. But with the right processes in place, it can also be a chance to build an energized, united team for the path forward.

Worksheet: Action planning for change

Defining the change

What is the change?	What is driving it?	Why is it important?

What internal stakeholder(s) will it impact, and how?

Stakeholder /Group(s)	How will the change impact them?	What will they need?

What external stakeholder(s) will it impact, and how?

Stakeholder /Group	How will the change impact them?	What will they need?

Action planning to inform a more detailed project plan and timetables

How will we foster alignment around the change?	
What is our communication plan throughout?	
Who will drive the change?	
What roles will others play?	
Who will make decisions?	
Do we have the skills to implement the change? If not, how will we fill the gap(s)?	
How will roles and resourcing change as a result of the implementation?	
At key intervals: What are we learning? How do we need to adjust our plan?	