

A Closing Reflection

Alexa Cortés Culwell | December 2024

Sunsetting Open Impact

After nearly a decade of operations, Open Impact is sunseting at year's end, following many months of intentional planning and reflection. This is a bittersweet moment, but I'm confident the richness and depth of everything we've learned along the way will endure and find new form in our team's and clients' next chapters.

This final report seeks to record these key learnings along with Open Impact's origin story, work, and approach. I also want to make it accessible to others who are on similar journeys, whether as donors or as the staff/advisors supporting them.

As I reflect on the last decade, it's incredible to me that our team completed over 200 client projects focused on the interconnected areas of strategy, governance, and organizational design—and helped direct billions of dollars in the process. If the firm had a few secret ingredients to unlocking greater impact, they would be wading into deep waters to tackle stubborn governance issues, centering justice and equity in analysis and storytelling, and building an internal culture of talented colleagues united by collective purpose. Our collective purpose called us to be honest and direct with clients at every turn in our process as we learned that our communities needed us to do a lot more truth telling and a lot less sugar coating.

In all of our work, we strove to balance the desire of many of our clients to use philanthropy as a tool for family engagement with the solutions needed to address the most important issues of our time. To ensure effective strategy and implementation, we pushed our clients to evolve their thinking about governance, including who holds power and decision rights in the work. We partnered with them to hire experienced leaders who were adept at building strong cultures and centering community needs. To arrive at meaningful strategies, we actively sought out and included underrepresented voices, differing points of view, and data that showed who was most impacted by the issues our clients cared about, and why.

Finally, none of this would have been possible without the dedication of three incredible women who joined me in building Open Impact from the ground up: my co-founder Heather McLeod Grant and partners Gretchen Selfridge and Kate Wilkinson. The four of us will be forever grateful to the team members who contributed to our larger purpose, field colleagues who believed in us, communities of experts and leaders whose perspectives shaped our work, and the clients who trusted us.

With gratitude,



Alexa Cortés Culwell
Co-founder and CEO

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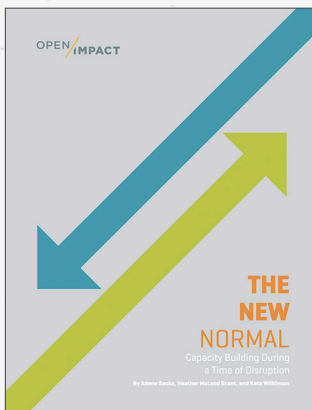
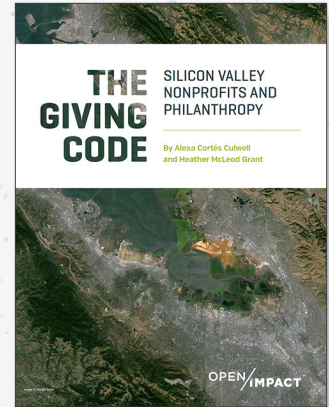
KEY TAKEAWAYS

**How to Work
With Clients**

Our Origin Story

Open Impact started well before it ever had a name. In 2015, Heather McLeod Grant and Alexa Cortés Culwell joined forces with Kate Wilkinson, Kelly Costa, and Gretchen Selfridge to publish a report—[The Giving Code](#)—on the exponential growth in wealth and philanthropy in Silicon Valley. Our central insight was shocking: Less than 5% of philanthropic dollars were going to community-based organizations that supported basic needs, despite the fact that 30% of residents of Silicon Valley, with one of the largest GDPs in the world, were relying on private or public assistance to get by. The report's findings struck a deep chord—it was cited at least 50 times by media outlets in the U.S. and globally, including in *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Economist*, and the *Financial Times*, and led to appearances on Bloomberg TV and KQED's Forum, among others.

The camaraderie of researching and writing *The Giving Code* compelled us, a group of independent contributors, to become an official firm. And thus, we created Open Impact, giving it a name that would be unifying for our team. Those two words so perfectly captured our purpose, values, and culture, as well as our ultimate legacy. We worked to center impact in everything we did and to remain open about the many potential approaches needed to get there.



The Giving Code's insights were published at a unique moment in history, just ahead of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, at a time when issues such as income inequality and racial justice were rarely discussed in mainstream circles. That would change dramatically in the ensuing years. In 2020, a global pandemic, an economic crisis, and the rampant murders of Black Americans caused the field of philanthropy—including our clients—to contend with their own approaches and acknowledge deep gaps in the way they understood, framed, and addressed issues.



Our firm took this moment to account for the shortcomings of our own work and find our way forward. In doing so, we began to see that a project such as *The Giving Code* was imperfect in its analysis. In retrospect we should have more explicitly named the drivers of the dynamics we uncovered—namely, growing economic inequality in Silicon Valley rooted in racial injustice—and framed solutions that included policy change. Hiring diverse, young talent to lead our research function transformed this critical part of our work for the better, helping us to get to root causes in ways that inspired our clients and us to do better. We also seized the opportunity to develop reports that met the moment, including [The New Normal](#), which examined philanthropy's role in bolstering movement organizations in the wake of the 2016 U.S. election, and later in 2021, [Get it Right](#), which challenged philanthropy to shed outmoded practices and make five shifts in support of a more equitable region.

Our Culture

From the beginning, we knew that anything we asked of our clients, we had to ask of ourselves. Our work with clients often unearthed cultural norms that needed to be upended in order to unlock the full potential of their philanthropy. And we knew that culture would be critical to our success too, so we invested considerable time, energy, and money in getting it right. Early on, we went through the process of becoming a certified B Corporation, aligning internal practices to our vision of a more just world.

We were intentional about having a clearly articulated strategy with transparent goals so that we never lost sight of our larger mission. Our culture was bolstered by team retreats that ensured we were aggregating our collective insights so the firm could truly be greater than the sum of our parts, which we called "growing our OI brain." But it wasn't just about the growth of the firm—we were committed to the growth of every team member. Early on, Heather and I determined that one of our enduring legacies would be investing in the next group of leaders, growing something much larger than ourselves.

We were relentless with giving and receiving feedback in the course of our everyday work from the start, understanding it was the ultimate sign of respect and commitment to make each other better. We also invested in coaching to ensure independent feedback on our work and team dynamics, and to facilitate key team meetings and retreats. Later we stood up an advisory board to report out on our progress, seek advice on firm strategy, and ensure more diverse perspectives around key challenges we were facing.

We further supported and funded team members toward their individual growth goals by encouraging them to take on stretch goals, attend key conferences to expand their networks, and complete courses and certifications.

The success of these clear intentions makes sunseting Open Impact even more satisfying as our team takes the work forward into their next chapters.

Our Vision, Clients, and Impact

When the firm launched, we resisted defining our target market too narrowly. We wanted to stay open to the possibilities of where projects might take us. We worked with a wide variety of clients, including nonprofits and leadership networks. Ultimately, we focused on donor-led philanthropies, where we saw the most momentum and impact, and philanthropy-serving organizations that provided support and programming for thousands of donors, exponentially increasing our influence.

We also developed a core belief statement to be clear about our purpose and intentions:

We believe that wealthy families have an opportunity to build a more just, resilient, and equitable world by how they grow, align, and deploy their assets. We envision a growing global community, which we are a part of, that is actively reimagining philanthropy's role and deploying its capital and influence in ways that repair and heal our planet and its people.

Clarifying our target market and core belief statement enabled us to emerge as effective guides to those with power and money, and helped them give in ways—at times, uncomfortable or belief-upending ways—that were truly regenerative for people and the planet.

While our passion was evident, our talent differentiated us. The experience of our partners, having started, operated, and scaled nonprofits and

philanthropies, made us highly credible and valued by our clients. This also enabled a level of candor with clients that was not always the norm. They came to trust us because they knew we were passionate about their success and had the experience to lead them through growth and change.

We quickly learned that telling the truth about the racial injustices that drive a social problem, or being willing to highlight client cultures and behaviors that impede success, was much harder than simply focusing on a tidy deliverable. Our teams invested considerable time mapping out what would unlock the right kind of change and movement for each client, often defining it through clearly articulated phases of change management.

Clients that came to us with strategy projects also needed governance planning. There were often longstanding tensions around decision rights for

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setting issue areas, strategy, and budgets, as well as grant approval levels. And given that many of our clients were scaling up their giving, they often turned to us for support on organizational design, hiring, and grantmaking implementation.

Supporting a client, particularly a living donor/founder, to work through these issues required bridging sectors and perspectives, translating between social justice and private sector frameworks to deepen a client's understanding rather than alienating them. We also championed more inclusive leadership approaches to transform the way organizations defined and approached their impact in the world, fighting against ineffective models to find new ways of being and working.

It was a careful dance that required risk taking, and we're proud of how we balanced holding both ourselves and our clients accountable to impact.

Being willing to lean into harder work paid off. From start to finish, we served 72 clients and completed 215 projects, which enabled us to work

on many of the important issues of our time. We built significant influence, advising clients with extraordinary philanthropic assets, and retained them by forming deeply trusting relationships that helped them land what they'd never been able to before. We know this because they kept coming back—nearly 60% of our clients worked with us on two or more projects.

We also helped establish or reinvigorate several major foundations, many focused on local community needs. Our research projects—The Giving Code, The Giving Journey, and Get It Right—were fundamental to our impact and led us to develop a deep capability focused on place-based philanthropic strategies. Over time, this extended to interconnected issue areas of advancing economic mobility, mitigating climate change, and strengthening our fraying democracy.

The result: We changed how our clients deployed their assets, and helped them rethink outdated giving models so they could use their capital more intentionally. The courageous leaders and organizations we worked with prioritized providing services and advocating for the redesign of systems to work for low-income communities instead of against them. Ultimately, they were able to do more for the issues they were passionate about.

Closing Thoughts

While the firm is winding down, the impact of our work is now being magnified through our team members, all rising women leaders, who are finding new opportunities to bring the lessons we learned forward into new roles. We can't wait to see how their careers continue to develop.



Acknowledgements

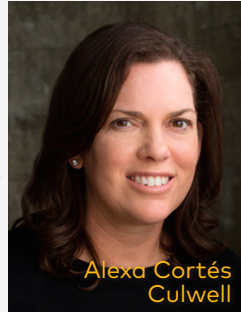
Our gratitude list is long and starts with all **72 clients** who invited us to partner with them. Open Impact would not exist without your trust in us, and we will always be grateful for all we learned from, and with, you. We came to believe that a client project was only as successful as the voices and data that informed it, and therefore we owe a debt of gratitude to **a diverse network that includes philanthropy and social impact leaders, community leaders and residents, and academics**—all experts in their own right—who contributed their perspectives, data, research insights, and lived experiences to push our thinking and make our work stronger.

We also want to thank three extraordinary women who came alongside us in our earliest days and stuck with us for the entire journey: **Katherine Fulton** helped us build an organizational model and brand we could be proud of, leveraging her years of wisdom running several innovative consultancies that were ahead of their time; **Nancy Cannon O'Connell** served as our extraordinary executive coach from day one, helped us develop as leaders and become a cohesive team; **Irene Wong**, longtime Director of The David and Lucile Packard Foundation's local giving program, provided the inspiration and start-up capital that emboldened us to write *The Giving Code*. These three women also served on our advisory board alongside other remarkable colleagues we are grateful to: **Lisa Jones, Nelson González, Efraín Gutiérrez, and April Chou.**

The all-women team at Open Impact is unsurpassed in terms of collective talents and love for one another and the work. **Heather McLeod Grant** helped jumpstart Open Impact as co-founder, bringing her many superpowers, including deep experience in consulting to help us develop our model, an ability to "see the next horizon" to ensure we were at the forefront of our work, as well as success as a best-selling author to create our ground-breaking reports.

Gretchen Miller Selfridge and Kate Wilkinson

were integral from our earliest days and became firm partners, critical to our growth and success. Gretchen leveraged her early years in the Silicon Valley tech sector followed by a second chapter scaling a global nonprofit to a third chapter of developing Open Impact's elegant operating model and deepening our client offerings with her operations and financial acumen. She made establishing a firm like ours seem effortless, and brought a rare combination of empathy, skill, and wisdom. Kate entered when Open Impact was still gestating and not yet named. After some time of informal mentorship, she told me, essentially, that she would do whatever it took to join our team. That script flipped entirely when she officially came onboard, with Kate becoming a teacher and guide through every stage of Open Impact's evolution.



Alexa Cortés
Culwell



Gretchen
Selfridge



Kate
Wilkinson



Heather
McLeod Grant



Kat
Vang

Kelly Costa jumpstarted our research and design function with her stellar contributions to our client work and our first report. Later, the remarkable **Kat Vang** scaled up our research function and deepened our client offerings with incredible skill and creative energy. She still holds the record for the greatest interview ever. **Alyssa Moore, Sam Tongo, Hannah Aragon, Lisa Monzón, and Bithika "Misha" Schmidt** joined us at key junctures to bring added dimension and depth to our work and team.



Hannah
Aragon



Kelly
Costa



Lisa
Monzón



Alyssa
Moore



Bithika 'Misha'
Schmidt



Sam
Tongo

This remarkable group of women is a collective force now distributed to new callings, and it was the experience of a lifetime to work alongside each and every one of them.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

How to Build Team Culture

People often asked how we got so much done as such a small firm.

Our effectiveness was the result of having the right clients, a deeply experienced team, and a culture designed to do impactful work.

Below, we've reflected on some of the key ingredients that played an outsized role and that we stand behind—they're insights that scaled the firm's collective learning in new ways, and ones that our team will carry with us.



Align on a collective purpose.

Our team was animated and unified around the vision and "why" of our work captured by our core belief statement. The work was hard enough, so belief and unity of purpose was a critical starting point.



Work together.

We shared success by actively supporting each other's projects and leveraging the "collective OI brain" to develop insights and solutions that wouldn't have been possible with a single person. This included the extensive research we gathered for projects from external sources, including a broad network of colleagues we tapped for insights. We never reinvented the wheel, but sought instead to build on one another's work constantly adapting, improving, and seeking feedback to iterate our work and make it better. Our last project always informed the next, guiding us to build upon our learnings every step of the way and deliver the best solutions to our clients and ourselves.



Communicate openly and often.

Whether in our interactions with clients or as an internal team, we erred on the side of making sure everyone was in the loop. We knew email was good for transactions but not discussions, so we hopped on the phone or initiated a face-to-face meeting to share important updates, work through a problem, or brainstorm a solution. We valued feedback, both giving and receiving, as an act of respect, vulnerability, generosity, and commitment to the growth and well-being of others and ourselves.



Celebrate what actually matters.

We had success in terms of growth—clients, projects, and revenue—but we never had a team celebration because we hit a revenue high. Instead, our celebrations always focused on big milestones that centered teamwork that helped clients unleash more money to combat fundamental issues of our time.



Prioritize team, not hierarchy.

Twice a year we retreated to beautiful locations to spend time with each other and generate new ideas — absent of hierarchy and where everyone's opinions were valued — a practice we also modeled in our client engagements. Those retreats bonded us together in a way we couldn't have achieved otherwise.



Support and mentor all team members.

With less experienced team members, we built scaffolding to support them as they took on more responsibility, providing coaching and support along the way. We talked explicitly about the uncomfortable things that may emerge with clients who weren't accustomed to taking guidance from younger team members and women of color. For example, one of our teammates said: "I always felt prepared, safe, protected, resourced, and supported to lead. Our leadership helped navigate the soft skills, like when someone doesn't listen to you."



Stay open to learning about diverse perspectives.

We were intentional about understanding and supporting the perspectives of people who are systematically marginalized. For our team, this meant we valued diverse colleagues and the unique experiences and networks that each of us brought. We looked for ways to incorporate new learnings to continuously improve our work, were willing to change our minds, and took risks in service of fighting for what is right.

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Choose clients thoughtfully.

Just as we picked team members who aligned with our values, so too did we choose our client partners, because they were indeed partners. As we all worked toward a shared vision, it was imperative that we selected clients who were mission aligned. The referrals we received were a testament to the roster we had built.



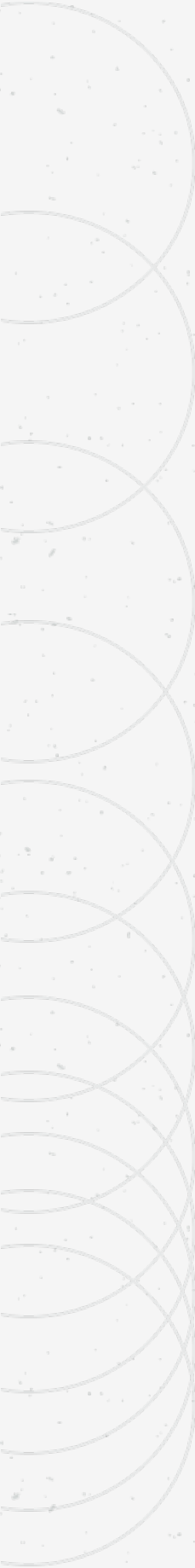
Speak hard truths.

In the discovery phase of a project, we began with interviewing key stakeholders, which enabled us to get to the heart of their needs quickly. We distilled the insights and our recommendations into straightforward memos that never shied away from the truth. Having hard conversations isn't easy but philanthropy isn't about playing it safe, and we knew tough conversations ultimately elevated all of us to lean into our most ambitious goals and accelerated the path to getting there.



Take a holistic approach, that includes strategy and governance.

Clarifying or establishing a philanthropy's purpose, approach, and areas of work could not take flight until we addressed issues of governance—who held decision rights and why. This was especially important for multi-generational philanthropies and those seeking to share power not only to include family members but also the voices and influence of those most impacted. When



it came time to help donors sort through oftentimes tricky dynamics surrounding governance, we were able to guide them to solutions that created a harmonious path forward for everyone within their organization. This was a body of work we fine-tuned over the years, learning how to adeptly neutralize and depersonalize decisions that often felt deeply personal.



Reimagine strategic planning.

The static five-year plan is outdated. We helped clients think more dynamically about their long-term goals, which often led to a necessary shift from strategic philanthropy to community-centered philanthropy, allowing clients to be more responsive to stakeholder feedback.



Prioritize process alongside deliverables.

Our approach relied on getting everyone's buy-in at the outset, driving alignment and surfacing the best ideas from a client's entire team. This ultimately led to better engagement from stakeholders. Our process was designed to be transparent and supportive. We left room for everyone's ideas to evolve as the work took shape, showing that we prioritized getting it right, not just getting it done.



Lean into research.

We learned early on the power of being able to make our case with narrative research that married data and storytelling. Research can reveal root causes that are based on policies and practices that favor one group over others. Only with these deeper insights can deeper solutions be found and funded.