A Deeper Dive: Moving Beyond Diversity 101 at Grand Rapids Community Foundation

A community foundation gets intentional about diversity and inclusion.

Established in 1922 "with little more than a $25 donation and a dream," the Grand Rapids Community Foundation has grown from a fledgling grantmaking organization focused on "perpetuating the moral, physical, and mental welfare of the city and its people" to a seasoned and engaged community leader. In 2000, the foundation changed its name to Grand Rapids Community Foundation (GRCF) to reflect its expanded roles of convening, advocacy, and initiatives advancing "long-term solutions to diverse community challenges."[1]

Under the 25-year tenure of the current president, Diana Sieger, the foundation has become known for its efforts to ensure that its policies and programming are welcoming to and reflective of the increasingly diverse Grand Rapids community. Sieger notes that, although the community foundation has "taken heat"[2] over the years for its focus on diversity and inclusion, management and staff have remained committed to raising awareness of and learning about discrimination in all its forms, participating in training programs such as the Institute for Healing Racism[3].

Challenge

In 2009, when GRCF staff members learned about an accreditation program called Partners for a Racism-Free Community (PRFC), they became determined to attain the coveted status of "racism-free organization.[4]"

That same year, Sieger, a charter member of the advisory committee for CMF's Transforming Michigan Philanthropy through Diversity and Inclusion (TMP) initiative, learned about the Peer Action Learning Network (PALN).

Intrigued by the program's proposed curriculum and its emphasis on intercultural competency as a means of transforming philanthropic organizations and their funding behaviors, Sieger says that "when we heard about the opportunity of the Peer Action Learning Network, we just jumped at the chance."

The timing proved fortuitous. Marcia Rapp, GRCF's vice president of programs, recalls thinking that getting through the PRFC assessment would take "a month or two. We felt we were already hitting the mark on these issues," she says. "But it turned out to be an extremely rigorous process."[5] In 2010, she and Sieger formed the first

Marcia Rapp

GRCF PALN team. The team made PRFC accreditation the focus of its year-long "action learning project."

Insight

Sieger, Rapp, and four other GRCF leaders formed a team that joined groups from five other Michigan foundations to make up the first PALN cohort, in 2010. "We had no idea what the experience was going to be," Sieger says. "That first year was like peeling away an onion skin—layer after layer of *aha!* moments."

One in a series of case studies developed by the Council of Michigan Foundations (CMF) to share the experiences and learnings of member organizations at the leading edge of its Transforming Michigan Philanthropy through Diversity and Inclusion (TMP) initiative. These early adopters participated in CMF's Peer Action Learning Network (PALN), a yearlong, expert-led engagement program designed to strengthen participant foundations' capacity in diverse and inclusive leadership, management, and grantmaking. Additional TMP resources may be accessed at www.michiganfoundations.org.

The revelations began when the team received the results of their individual, team, and organization Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)® assessments (see sidebar). "Taking a look at the aggregate scores for our group and for the entire organization —getting a picture of the worldview of the Grand Rapids Community Foundation— was quite eye-opening for us," says Sieger.

GETTING A PICTURE OF THE WORLDVIEW OF THE GRAND RAPIDS COMMUNITY FOUNDATION WAS QUITE EYE-OPENING FOR US.
—Diana Sieger, president

Like many well-intentioned organizations that have been through diversity training and worked to increase awareness of racial discrimination, GRCF found itself in the middle of the Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC)®, in the "Minimization" stage where organizational behaviors tend to downplay cultural differences and emphasize the ways in which "people are people."

"Even though we thought we were quite advanced, from the standpoint of grantmaking and the groups we were focusing on in terms of development and donor relations," Sieger says, "the IDI demonstrated to me that we had work to do."

Sieger's understanding of her own individual IDI results, which placed her one stage further along the continuum at "Acceptance," gave her new insight into her role as a leader. "I realized I had to be careful about coming off as preachy," she says. "I need to understand where people are at, what's going on in their world, and come at it that way."

Other members of the first GRFC PALN team also noted ways in which their individual IDI assessments helped them to be more understanding of others—and forgiving of themselves.

"The assessment helped me understand why some of my perceptions were what they were," explains Marilyn Zack, vice president, development, and a member of the inaugural PALN team. "It was all part of my background and upbringing and the whole package that is me. That sort of gave me permission to feel okay about myself—not that I didn't have some work to do, but that I could stop beating myself up about it. I recognized that [intercultural competence] is something you have to individually question and push forward. It's only through that process that you're going to get where you want to go."[6]

As the team members worked their way through the PALN curriculum, they came to new levels of understanding about diversity and inclusion. "We had two excellent facilitators in Beth Zemsky and Lynn Wooten," Sieger says, "and they designed a process that was not another 'Diversity 101,' but one that presented a broader view of cultural competence. That was so helpful."

"I have been exposed to a lot of work with diversity and inclusion, but more on the racism side of things," says Jonse Young, director of philanthropic services and another member of the first GRFC PALN team. "PALN really helped me broaden my thinking about diversity and inclusion beyond even ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and the like, to include things like diversity of thought."[7]

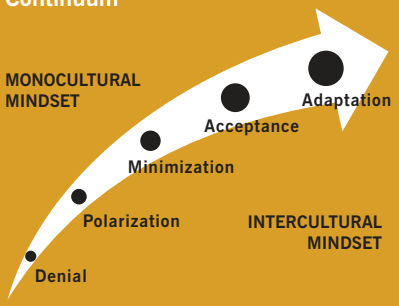
PALN REALLY HELPED ME BROADEN MY THINKING ABOUT DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION BEYOND EVEN ETHNICITY, RELIGION, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, AND THE LIKE, TO INCLUDE THINGS LIKE DIVERSITY OF THOUGHT.
—Jonse Young, director, philanthropic services

Young recalls a particularly enlightening PALN session where the subject was "intent vs. impact."

"It happens every day: a person says something or does something and intends it one way, but the impact on the person on the receiving end is something very different," she says. "That has helped me so much. Because I *know* that the intent of anyone working at this community foundation is good. But in day-to-day activity,

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Intercultural Development Continuum



Based on a theoretical framework developed by communications studies professor Milton Bennett, the Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC) provides a helpful graphic guide to the ways individuals think about and respond to cultural differences. Five stages, plotted along a continuum from "Denial" to "Adaptation," depict an increasingly complex understanding of cultural differences. Each stage is linked to a specific set of behaviors displayed when individuals and organizations interact with different demographic groups.

Bennett identified the earlier stages as "ethnocentric," relating to a *monocultural mindset* that avoids dealing with cultural difference by denying its existence, raising defenses against it, or minimizing its importance. As people grow in intercultural competence, they move into the "ethnorelative" stages of an *intercultural mindset* which actively seeks out cultural difference, accepts its importance, and adapts behavior in response.[8]

The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) is an assessment tool that measures orientation to cultural difference to identify the current developmental level of an individual, group, or organization on the IDC continuum. Now used in corporate, government, nonprofit, and education settings around the world, the IDI is widely accepted as a reliable and valid measure of intercultural competency.

The IDI® and the IDI Intercultural Development Plan® are registered Trademarks and Copyrighted (2007, 2011) by Mitchell R. Hammer, Ph.D., IDI, LLC.

one can be misunderstood; the intention can be different than what the impact is."

Young says that the PALN curriculum "walked us through what to do when that happens, how to address it—that instead of taking a confrontational stance, we could say: 'Tell me more about that. Help me understand what you are thinking about that.' That puts you on an even par to begin to have a really healthy conversation."

Strategy

Working on their PRFC accreditation was a natural choice for the first GRFC PALN team's Action Learning Project, in which participants use their new intercultural insights and skills to tackle an organizational objective.

Designating the accreditation work as a group project "helped us get through this very rigorous process," Young says. "It does not leave any stone unturned: policies, procedures, practices, vendor relations, publications—it was a lot of work, and PALN gave us a deadline and helped us get other staff members excited and involved."

As GRCF "co-champions for diversity and inclusion," Rapp and Young had been spearheading the work with Partners for a Racism-Free Community. When the PALN team strategized their Action Learning Project, they decided that the policy review work was something that "needed to be done on a continuous basis, to be engrained in our organization," Young explains. "PALN helped us mobilize the work and spread it out among the other team members. Then other staff got involved—it was contagious."

Young says that the GRCF team was "very intentional" about sharing its PALN experience with colleagues back at the foundation. "We demonstrated or reenacted the PALN exercises in our 'town hall' staff meetings." Referring to her well-used copy of the PALN *Toolkit*—a collection of handouts and exercises designed to help PALN participants share knowledge and skills with the rest of their organization—Young says: "It's tattered and torn because I have been using and plan to keep on using it. It's a good resource."

GRCF PALN team

Zack affirms that one of the most helpful aspects of the PALN curriculum was that "it provided us a platform for coming back to the foundation and just talking about these issues in a really open and honest way. All of a sudden those conversations got pretty simple because PALN provided the information, the context, the tools we needed to have those conversations back here at the office," she says.

Results

In March of 2012, "after a great deal of work and dedication on the part of all staff at the Community Foundation,"[9] GRCF was awarded *Full Partner Designation* from Partners for a Racism-Free Community. Sieger and her staff credit the PALN program with helping them through the challenging effort to review and document policies and procedures using an intercultural lens.

GRCF has now sent two teams to PALN, and has a third group signed up for the next session beginning in the fall of 2013. "Since we only employ about 25 people, that will mean at least three-quarters of our staff will have participated in the program," says Young. "The fact that we made sure different departments were represented on each team allowed for some good peer learning, some fast learning that wouldn't have happened in our normal, day-to-day work."

One outgrowth of of the PALN/PRFC work was a grassroots movement that became known as the "Culture Club." Formed by GRCF staff members as a way to infuse some relevant entertainment into the arduous policies and procedures review, club members researched and developed presentations on the customs, holidays, and cuisines of different world cultures. "They got really jazzed about the work and started making presentations at our monthly *Town Hall* staff meetings," Rapp says. "It was completely voluntary and a lot of fun—people were really excited about the learning."

Rapp notes that the club's activities were developmentally suited to a time in GRCF's intercultural competency journey when building awareness and appreciation of cultural difference was key. Two years later, the group has progressed to a new place on the IDC, and is re-forming itself under "a more professional name, like the Diversity Inclusion Advisory Committee."

THE CULTURE OF THE FOUNDATION HAS CHANGED. THERE'S MORE OPENNESS TO LEARNING ABOUT DIFFERENCES RATHER THAN BEING EITHER AFRAID OF OR TICKED-OFF BY THEM. —Marcia Rapp, vice president, programs

"The culture of the foundation has changed," Rapp asserts. "There's more openness to learning about differences rather than being either afraid of or ticked-off by them. In conversations around underserved populations I see people who in the past would have been silent or said negative things now asking questions and really throwing themselves into learning about difference."

Jonse Young

A new human resources policy ensures that intercultural competency and other foundation values are evaluated as part of annual performance reviews and requires staff members to report on efforts they've made to learn about and advance diversity and inclusion on the job.

New programming policies at the community foundation include one that Rapp has been advocating for some time. "Twenty years ago, I got really big pushback from the board questioning why it was important to question a grantee regarding a disparity between the make-up of their board and the populations they serve," she says.

But in April of this year, the GRCF Board of Trustees approved a sturdy diversity and inclusion policy for grantmaking partnerships that makes Rapp proud. Stating that the community foundation seeks "grantees and partners that incorporate diversity and inclusion into their mission, governance board, staff, volunteers, vendors, and constituents served,"[10] the new policy will be rolled out in the fall. Rapp expects more pushback, but not from the board, which she says is "behind us 100 percent."

On the donor front, one of the groups GRCF has been working to engage as part of its PALN work is the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community in Grand Rapids.

"As a community foundation, we've been quietly supportive of the LGBT community for many years," says Marilyn Zack. But she credits the PALN program's emphasis on intercultural sensitivity with helping the foundation "become a lot more comfortable with being intentional about our work in this area." In 2013, while GRCF's third PALN team was going through the year-long program, Zack led an effort to convene an advisory committee that "could counsel us on the best ways to reach out to the LGBT community."

One outcome was a series of estate-planning workshops for LGBT couples and individuals to help them gain a greater understanding of the unique challenges they might face.

WE'RE OPENING UP A NEW PIPELINE OF POTENTIAL DONORS WHO NOW RESPECT THE WORK OF OUR COMMUNITY FOUNDATION BECAUSE WE SHOW THAT RESPECT BACK TO THEM. —Marilyn Zack, vice president, development

"We're opening up a new pipeline of potential donors who now respect the work of our community foundation because we show that respect back to them," Zack says. "And this is just one example of a group that has typically not been engaged when it comes to organized philanthropy."

Moving Forward

Diversity and inclusion "isn't an issue that is addressed quickly," Zack says, "and it will take some time for us to tell our story out in the community. But the community foundation is perfectly situated as a change agent in Grand Rapids, and our really intentional work in the area serves as a good example for other organizations. Over time, I really do believe that the growth we've experienced through PALN will infiltrate throughout the community, and we'll all be better for it."

Sieger admits that she is still "stunned" by organizations in the community that don't have—or understand the importance of having—"a blend of voices on their boards." But she says her new awareness of the developmental nature of intercultural competence has helped her to realize that it's not "our responsibility to send off an edict to an organization that doesn't know at this point in time why that's important." She and her staff plan to work with their community partners "in phases and stages, providing assistance to help them reach that understanding."

LESSONS FOR SUCCESS

Start from the top.
Leadership commitment to learning and moving forward is essential.

Learn from your peers.
Other foundations and nonprofits offer fresh perspectives on issues your own organization may have been "recycling" for years.

Take a deep dive.
Understanding your own personal belief systems and their impacts can be transformational.

Endnotes

1 Grand Rapids Community Foundation. “The Foundation History.” http://www.grfoundation.org/history

2 Sieger, D. This and subsequent quotes from an interview conducted in Grand Rapids on June 24, 2013.

3 Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce. “Institute for Healing Racism.” http://www.grandrapids.org/institute-for-healing-racism

4 Partners for a Racism-Free Community. “Organization Assessment and Credentialing.” http://prfc-gr.org/assessment/info

5 Rapp, M. This and subsequent quotes from an interview conducted in Grand Rapids on June 24, 2013.

6 Zack, M. This and subsequent quotes from an interview conducted in Grand Rapids on July 1, 2013.

7 Young, J. This and subsequent quotes from an interview conducted in Grand Rapids on July 1, 2013.

8 Bennett, M. “Becoming Interculturally Competent.” In Wurzel, J. (Ed.). Toward Multiculturalism: A Reader in Multicultural Education. Intercultural Resource Corporation, 2004. http://www.wholecommunities.org/pdf/privilege/4_Becominginterculturallycompe_Bennett.pdf

9 Grand Rapids Community Foundation. “Volunteer Diversity, Inclusion and Racism-Free Values and Commitment.” Internal form approved by Board of Trustees, April 9, 2012.

10 Grand Rapids Community Foundation. “Grand Rapids Community Foundation Diversity and Inclusion Policy: Grantmaking and Donor Partnerships.” Internal policy approved by Board of Trustees, April 8, 2013.

Credits:

Vicki Rosenberg
Vicki Rosenberg & Associates
Editor

Debra Wierenga
D2 Words
Writer

Karen Gibson
Designer

John Lacko
Lacko Photography
Photography

Council of Michigan Foundations
One South Harbor, Suite 3
Grand Haven, Michigan 49417
616.842.7080
michiganfoundations.org