Getting Comfortable with Conflict: Strategic Conversations at the Kalamazoo Community Foundation

An organization committed to community moves toward a new understanding of ownership and power.

Founded in 1925 "on the simple idea that it is our responsibility to look after one another[1]," the Kalamazoo Community Foundation (KCF) continues to fulfill that responsibility by convening and supporting nonprofit organizations in the greater Kalamazoo area. Recognizing that the community it serves "draws its spirit, vitality, and character"[2] from an increasingly diverse population, in recent years KCF has emphasized the importance of diversity and inclusion as a core organizational value.

In 2010, the foundation's board of trustees passed a resolution to declare KCF an anti-racist organization, committed to eliminating the structural racism that "perpetuates the inequalities that threaten the well-being of our community."[3] Working with a local group[4] whose mission is to eliminate racism in southwest Michigan, KCF management and staff have all participated in training designed to "develop a shared understanding of systematic racism across all levels of the institution."

Challenge

When Carrie Pickett-Erway joined the first KCF PALN team in 2010, she was senior community investment officer. As a member of the foundation's second team, she was in a vice-presidential role, and when she returned for a third year of PALN training, in 2012, it was as president and chief executive officer. During a period that saw transitions in four of six leadership positions, participation in CMF's Peer Action Learning Network has played a constant and expanding role in the community foundation's exploration of diversity and inclusion.

Susan Springgate, chief financial officer, and also a participant in the first KCF PALN team, recalls that the original decision to participate in the program "started out to be hard, then got to be an easy decision."[5] At the time that KCF received the invitation to join the charter PALN effort, they were also working with a local organization that provided a training program focused on building awareness of and eliminating institutional racism.

"We were comparing their program with the PALN offering, and felt that we had to choose one or the other," Springgate says. "But as we learned more about the intention behind the CMF initiative, we decided to do both—something that was very unusual for us as an organization."

Carrie Pickett-Erway

Suprotik Stotz-Ghosh, vice president of community development, and a member of the foundation's second PALN team, joined KCF in 2011, when the organization was heavily invested in both programs. "It was very clear to me: this place is different," he says. "Every other organization I had been with had all the right language about diversity and inclusion, but really didn't do anything about it. Here, people actually work at it."[6]

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.

So when KCF employees took the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)® assessment (see sidebar) at the start of their first year in PALN, Pickett-Erway[7] remembers some "initial disappointment" with the results, which indicated that the foundation was in the "Minimization" stage. "We were an organization that had done a lot of thinking and had really good intentions around diversity and inclusion," she recalls. "We expected our results to be 'better' than they were."

Insight

"We really didn't know what it meant, at first, to be 'in Minimization,'" Springgate says. But after a private consultation with PALN faculty to review her individual IDI results, she began to understand her own cultural perceptions in a completely new light. "As a person of blended European descent, I had never thought of myself as *having* a culture," she says. "PALN helped me understand that we all have a culture that informs the way we see the world."

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Stotz-Ghosh says that the developmental model offered by the IDI assessment gave KCF staff the understanding and vocabulary to talk about cultural differences in a "nonthreatening way." By contrast, he says, the anti-racism training "sent some people backwards into a place of shame and guilt for being white, really frozen in their ability to actually say anything. What PALN taught us is that anti-racist training is really for people who are already in 'Acceptance,' people who understand their cultural identity and how it's been deeply influenced by this country's history. People in 'Minimization' or earlier stages on the continuum aren't prepared to say, 'Okay, yes I grew up in a white supremacist country and I'm probably demonstrating those behaviors."

Stephanie Carrier, community investment assistant and a member of KCF's third PALN team, acknowledges that the institutional racism training she went through as a new hire "really sent me way into reversal." (The IDI defines "reversal" as "an overly critical orientation toward one's own cultural values and practices and an uncritical view toward others'.") "It was like, *I am part of this group of people who have done these horrible oppressive things over time.* I didn't see myself as a racist, but all of a sudden I was very aware that the fact that I walk around in this skin puts me in a group of people who automatically receive benefits they don't necessarily deserve."[8]

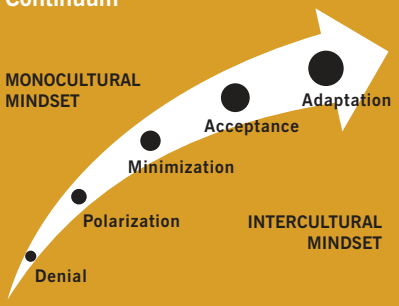
Carrier says that the results of her individual IDI assessment "very quickly revealed to me that I was still carrying some of that baggage and needed to let it go. PALN helped me dig deeper into my identity and where I came from culturally—it was just an understanding I had to move through to get beyond that Minimization stage where you kind of whitewash everything, say, 'Everything's okay.'"

"What we really appreciated about the individual assessments and consultations was that each person receives specific action steps they can pursue to move their intercultural competency in a positive direction," says Pickett-Erway. "To have that kind of interpretation and professional development coaching along with an assessment is just invaluable. Too often we're assessed and given a datapoint, but not really told what it means or how to improve it."

Pickett-Erway also notes that the PALN faculty worked with KCF staff to understand the foundation's collective IDI results and that a deeper understanding of what it meant to be an organization "in Minimization" helped "us use that as a datapoint for our growth going forward. Recognizing that we were actively doing things to move that score helped us be at peace with what it really was."

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.[9]

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.

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Strategy

As part of its annual strategic planning process, KCF undertakes an "environmental scan" of global, state, and local dynamics that affect the foundation's work to assess the challenges and opportunities it is likely to face in the years ahead.

"We've been using this process for about five years now," Pickett-Erway says. "We do a really good job of researching, reading articles in the field, studying demographic data, and reflecting on our own internal work. But looking at a recent summary report with an intercultural lens we recognized that we, as an organization, have a worldview that is reflective of who *we* are, and that may or may not be consistent with the community we serve. If we have a staff of middle-class, white individuals, the questions we ask, the opportunities we see, will be through the lens of that culture."

"It was the environmental scan of an organization in Minimization," explains Stotz-Ghosh.

"The PALN curriculum helped us recognize our own worldview so that we could be really intentional about bringing in other perspectives to help us see what we can't see, ask questions we wouldn't know to ask," says Pickett-Erway. "So this time around, in addition to the research and analysis we've always done, we've gone outside the organization to ask some of our diverse community partners to take a look at our data and say: *What are we missing? What does this mean to you? Which of these things matter?"*

Suprotik Stotz-Ghosh

KCF has been implementing this strategy of "broadening the conversation" on many different fronts. One of them involves a ten-year-old inclusion statement that grantees are required to sign to affirm that their organizations are open to all people "regardless of ethnicity, race, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, economic circumstances, physical and/or mental abilities, characteristics, philosophy, religion, or any other discriminatory reason."

"At a staff meeting, someone raised a question about the intent of that language with regard to the community foundation's policy of matching employee gifts to non-profits, including faith-based organizations," Pickett-Erway explains. Would KCF require faith-based recipients, for example, to agree to hiring practices that conflicted with their religious beliefs? "This led to a lot of internal conversations about the 'right' interpretation," she says. "Many staff members voiced concerns that the statement could exclude or limit relationships within the community."

Pickett-Erway says that KCF's PALN experience helped them "take a step back" and initiate a series of internal "conversations" that eventually included the foundation's board. "Smaller conversations became larger conversations," she says, "and we saw how just having those conversations—suspending judgement and just focusing on learning from each other—helped us move forward with forgiveness, healing, and a better perspective on the issue."

After several months of fairly intense discussion, KCF added two words, "where practical," to the inclusion statement.

"We adopted that language because we wanted to be more inclusive of faith-based organizations that had felt excluded from engaging with us," says Stotz-Ghosh. But shortly after introducing the revised inclusion statement, KCF community investment and donor relations officers found themselves fielding questions about the intention behind the new wording. "People were asking: 'Why are you applying this idea of practicality? It opens the door to potential racial discrimination.'"

Far from being discouraged by the difficulties of finding just the right words to communicate its vision of inclusion, KCF leadership views the latest challenge as an opportunity to learn more about how it is defined within the community it serves.

"Really, it's an opportunity for us to gather community voices, to hear how people are interpreting the new language," Stotz-Ghosh says. "Ultimately, the policy is accomplishing what it was intended to do, which is to engage this community in a conversation about the meaning of inclusion."

Results

KCF leadership and staff speak enthusiastically of the changes they've seen in themselves, their organization, and the foundation's relationships with the larger community over the course of their three-year engagement with PALN.

"As we've become more intentional about bringing the right people to the table and constantly questioning—*Do we have it right yet? What biases are we applying here?*—the level of commitment and ownership for the work is growing exponentially," says Pickett-Erway. She sees a dedication to improving diversity and inclusion spreading to other community organizations "because they're helping to drive it."

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—Suprotik Stotz-Ghosh, vice president of community development

Susan Springgate

She offers KCF's new environmental scan process as an example. "Not only is the report, the analysis, better—we're able to identify risks and challenges that we wouldn't have before—but it has helped us to let our guard down a little bit and recognize that we don't have to have all the answers. That through these new high-quality partnerships we're creating, our community can help us. And they love having a meaningful role within our processes and the potential for improving the foundation's impact on the community."

"Our goal is community change," says Stotz-Ghosh, "and I now believe that we have a fuller understanding of the power dynamics that get in the way of our ability to foster meaningful change." He explains that the PALN experience has helped KCF move from a transactional mode with grantees ("conversations where community partners try to tell us what they think we want to hear, to meet our worldview, so we will give them money") to "transformational grant-making" that engages community nonprofits in a conversation about what needs doing and the best way to do it.

"Foundations are always perceived as 'the money' at the table," Pickett-Erway says. "One of the things that was so valuable to us about PALN was the ability to be in a room with other foundations, to have a conversation about the power of money in relation to different biases and inequities. Our decisions are huge for our nonprofit partners; our decisions can affect whether or not they survive. To be able to talk with peers who understand that role in the community and are also trying to be more inclusive and equitable—that's been a real blessing and opportunity."

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Moving Forward

When KCF staff retook the IDI assessment in 2013, the results showed that the organization had made a significant shift toward greater intercultural competency and was now in the Acceptance stage. "It's exciting, and we absolutely give ourselves a big cheer for the growth we saw," says Pickett-Erway. "But it's a little humbling, too. We now have a more realistic understanding of how hard it is to move the needle on these issues. It took a lot of work, a lot of focused energy, and we're still not as far along as we want to be."

To keep the conversation going, a series of regularly scheduled "lunch and learn" meetings are hosted and facilitated by the KCF Inclusion and Diversity team. Participation is voluntary, but Pickett-Erway reports that despite the staff's busy workload, the sessions are invariably well attended. "It's a way for us to keep the content fresh and moving forward," she says. "It's a really important step for us to go out and practice communication, then share how it's going and how we can do it even better. The safe space that it takes for us to have that conversation has been very carefully and very intentionally built over the last year."

At a recent lunch-hour meeting, a full-to-bursting conference room of staff members shared stories of their experiences talking with grantees and donors about the intent behind the revised inclusion statement. On a flip chart at the head of the table, Pickett-Erway kept a running list of "lessons learned/best practices," which included the notes "importance of face-to-face conversations," "share your story early," "go-and-see is the best way to learn," and "impossible to get language perfect."

"We're still learning what inclusion looks like," says Stotz-Ghosh. "We're creating a culture where we're continually inviting people to ask difficult questions, to be comfortable with conflict, to share their stories. The answers are in the stories."

LESSONS FOR SUCCESS

Create a safe place and time for internal conversations. Get everyone around the same table.

Resist the desire to fix it. Keep asking questions; try to be comfortable with uncertainty.

Try, try again. If you have a goal you can't implement now, there will always be another chance to do better.

You're never 'there.' With diversity and inclusion, there's always more work to do.

Endnotes

1 Kalamazoo Community Foundation. “About Us.” http://www.kalfound.org

2 Kalamazoo Community Foundation. “Inclusion Statement.” http://www.kalfound.org/AboutUs/DiversityInclusion/InclusionStatement/tabid/265/Default.aspx

3 Kalamazoo Community Foundation. “Our Anti-Racist Identity.” http://www.kalfound.org/AboutUs/DiversityInclusion/AntiRacistIdentity/tabid/266/Default.aspx

4 Eliminating Racism and Claiming/Celebrating Equality. http://www.eracce.org

5 Springgate, S. This and subsequent quotes from an interview conducted in Kalamazoo on June 18, 2013.

6 Stotz-Ghosh, S. This and subsequent quotes from an interview conducted in Kalamazoo on June 18, 2013.

7 Pickett-Erway, C. This and subsequent quotes from an interview conducted in Kalamazoo on June 18, 2013.

8 Carrier, S. This and subsequent quotes from an interview conducted in Kalamazoo on June 18, 2013.

9 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

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