6

Discussion Guide

Ideas in Philanthropic Field Building

Where They Come from and How They Are Translated into Actions

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Discussion Guide

This discussion guide contains four sets of questions designed to help foundation program staff examine their own practices for identifying and assessing the viability of ideas for foundation investments and field building. The questions are excerpted from the paper, *Ideas in Philanthropic Field Building: Where They Come From and How They Are Translated into Actions*, and included here for the convenience of readers who wish to use them for individual study or group discussion purposes.

1. Searching for Harbingers of New Ideas, Innovative Practices, and Successful Models: Questions to Aid Analysis

Hirschhorn and Gilmore describe three ways in which the emerging connections between moral ideas and organizational practices can be seen: in "found pilots," the movement of innovative people ("comings and goings"), and in tensions in a field. The questions in this section can aid in identifying each of these signs of creative advances in a field:

A. Questions to ask when looking for "found pilots" or promising models that connect moral ideas and institutional action:

- Does the activity attract out-of-the-ordinary support inside or outside the originating organization? Does it attract volunteers?

- What kind of staying power does the activity have? Is it in its first month, first year, or second year?

- What kind of buzz has it created? Is enthusiasm about it infectious? Are journalists writing about it, fundraisers describing it, and other people trying to copy it?

- If the pilot is designed as a solution to some problem, is it an important problem?

- If the pilot were to become big, to spread far and wide, what new resources might it generate and from what sources?

B. Questions to ask when reading field movement in leadership personnel (comings and goings):

- Who has been attracted to the field to assume positions of leadership and how, if at all, are they different from traditional leaders?

- Which leaders have recently left the field? Did something in their practice, interests, or approach seem incompatible with their organization or the field? Where did they go and what was so attractive about the other opportunity?

- What stimulated the leadership changes? The normal demographics of succession? The sense of leaders failing in this field? The attractiveness of other sectors?

- Which leaders appear marginalized and what accounts for their position outside the mainstream?

C. Questions to ask when locating tensions within the organizations of the field or the field itself:

- What new conflicts have been cropping up in the field or organizations within the field? What are the roots of these conflicts? How do people experience and interpret them?

- What conflicts seem to cut across customary fault lines, creating unlikely alliances?

- Are people feeling the need to invent new places or venues in order to be heard on a divisive issue?

- What tensions feel vital and productive and have led to unexpected collaborations or breakthroughs?

- What tensions have attracted attention from outsiders, such as prospective employees, donors or funding sources?

- If a tension or issue were resolved, would it open up new opportunities for revenue or resources, or would it simply divide up existing resources?

2. Seeking Convergence of Trends: Questions to Gauge the Resonance of Initiative Ideas

Hirschhorn and Gilmore suggest that program officers launching new initiatives, or developing existing initiatives, should ask if the initiative will have resonance. Will it leverage the passions, purposes, and efforts of people in government agencies, not-for-profit organizations, or community institutions? Program officers can use the following questions as the basis for a checklist in planning initiatives:

- Are people investing in prototypes or models of the initiative I am interested in? Even if these efforts are embryonic, do they signal that some people are willing to commit their own time and money to the effort?

- Does it appear that my initiative can help resolve an underlying and widely felt tension in society? Do the found pilots represent innovative solutions to this tension?

- Are new leaders emerging in the pace-setting institutions of the field? Are thought leaders gaining influence among practitioners? Are the new ideas I am interested in associated with a new cohort of professionals whose education differs from their predecessors?

If the answer to these questions is yes, this is a signal that the market might be ripe for the foundation's initiative. It will neither be too far ahead, nor too far behind the field.

3. Marketing Ideas and Programs: Questions for Philanthropists Thinking About New Initiatives

Hirschhorn and Gilmore discuss the importance of taking the consumer's point of view and the pragmatics of consumption into account when conceiving and disseminating ideas and designing field-transforming strategies. The following questions can help grantmakers understand the consumer's perspective and develop successful marketing strategies:

1. Have we taken barriers into account? People targeted by the initiative may be reluctant to take up a new behavior because it is too hard, they do not have the time, it is not a priority, they forget, or "people like me don't do it."

2. Have we found ways to make new behavior more convenient, accessible, simple, easier, or inexpensive? Clinic hours can fit the schedules of people targeted; contraceptives can be

available in every locality and outlet possible. Sometimes a new behavior can be made so easy that a person can hardly refuse—e.g., on many new cars, the seat belts tighten when the doors close.

3. Are we solving the right problem? The Peace Corps was a product in search of a market until it began sending the technical specialists the host countries actually wanted—trained agronomists instead of new liberal arts college graduates.

4. Does your activity fit the culture? The need to figure out the norms and assumptions of target groups is just as strong in the U.S. as it is in the classic case of public health authorities approaching a third world country. An effective strategy is to involve the target group in the design of the social program.

5. Are we targeting those around the real target? Campaigns to prevent drunk driving often aim at those around the drinker: designated drivers, spouses, party hosts, or bartenders.

6. Have we sought allies beyond the usual suspects? Family planning programs seeking to distribute contraceptives have sometimes included neutral groups such as physicians, and opponents such as religious communities.

7. Are we making effective use of popular media, such as TV? The designated-driver campaign pitched story ideas to TV producers, who began weaving changing attitudes about drinking and driving into network scripts. After four seasons, messages consistent with the designated-driver campaign had appeared in over 160 shows.[1] Anti-smoking advocates have likewise asked producers to reduce the amount of smoking (except by villains) in TV shows.

8. Are we leveraging early adopters? With some social causes early adopters stand to lose because they may be at a disadvantage in the marketplace. For example, if I am the first to pick up litter in a littered neighborhood, but others don't follow, then my efforts will be wasted. If a few become committed to the cause, it is in their best interest to become active agents for change. A marketing campaign can strategically guide the urgency and enthusiasm of early adopters.

4. Field Building: Questions for Philanthropists Exploring Systems in a Field

In the questions that follow, Hirschhorn and Gilmore aim to help grantmakers examine the "pull forces," stakeholder relationships, scale considerations, and system design alternatives associated with building a field:

1. What is the target behavior or practice we are trying to change?

2. What institutions reinforce the target practice? How do these institutions reinforce each others' activities?

3. What alternative set of institutions could reinforce the new practice or desired behavior? How might these institutions together amplify the success, standing, or social impact of each its members?

4. What scale does this alternative set need to reach in order to change the target behavior?

5. What steps can we take now to bring a representative set of such institutions together?

6. What techniques (simulation, scenario writing, etc.) can we use to demonstrate the synergies of the parts to this representative set of institutions?

Endnote

1. Joy Williams. "Promoting Designated Drivers: The Harvard Alcohol Project," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine,* Volume 10, Number 3, 1994; and Board of Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, Institute of Medicine. *The Future of the Public's Health in the 21st Century,* Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2003, pp. 324–325.