

Transformative Leadership in Practice

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The Compton Foundation recently hosted a series of three small group conversations about its new mission statement and its implications for practice. Among the participants were some long-time grantees and friends of the Foundation as well as other provocative thinkers drawn from a variety of fields within the broader progressive movement. We asked them to help us uncover the layers of meaning inherent in our mission statement and to share their perspectives on how the Foundation might best realize this bold vision in the years ahead.

While the dynamics of the three groups were somewhat different, each responded to this challenge with enthusiasm, candor, and deep engagement. Connections were made across issue area silos and many participants lingered and continued to talk with each other long after the official end time of the gatherings. It was clear to all that something special had happened. What emerged from these conversations were multiple concrete examples of transformative leadership in practice. It's difficult to capture the animated spirit of these dialogues on paper, but what follows is an attempt to summarize themes, questions and proffered advice in order to share them with a broader audience. Wherever possible, I have used the exact words and phrases the participants did in the conversations.

Initial Impressions

When asked for their emotional reactions to the Foundation's new mission statement, our guests were particularly captivated by the phrases "ignite change," "transformative leadership" and "courageous storytelling." Here are some of the words and images they used to describe their feelings:

Evocative, bold, fresh, visionary, compelling, edgy, zesty. "It immediately grabs your attention because it's not entirely clear what it means."

Catalytic, spontaneous combustion, unplanned disruption, avalanche, tipping point, wave of change, spark, fire, yeast.

Forward Motion, energy, determined, courageous, action-oriented, aspirational, constant, long-term, image of a large flock of birds taking off together, "Let's Go!"

Optimistic, toward not against, hope, image of lighting a candle and holding it in a dark place, creates possibilities, invitation, happy, excited, image of a fountain, image of ripples flowing outward across a body of water.

Real, not pretentious, everyday people leading change, invitation to be authentic, take risks, images of Tiananmen Square, embraces the messiness and fear that's part of change.

Made Whole, sense of connectedness, centeredness, restorative, fertilization, fertile, web, network, reciprocity, support, less alone, image of people in a circle with a talking stick.

Broad Implications

Looking at the mission statement as a whole, what does it imply for how the Foundation will act in the world? When you lead with such a powerful message that encompasses so many possibilities, there were some cautions that the Foundation be as clear as it can about what exactly it is offering. For example, the phrase “we ignite change” raised a variety of questions. Who is “we?” Is it the Foundation or its grantees or both? Will the Foundation nurture the conditions that cause a spark to ignite? Will it help provide the fuel for the fire or the flame itself or both?

Above all, the mission statement promises a form of **dynamic engagement** that is qualitatively different from and that transcends the typical foundation rhetoric about partnership or collaboration with its grantees. It is also open and mindful about the power differential in a way that few funders are. Engagement is characterized by ongoing dialogue and strong relationships over the long term, not by directing or orchestrating the work of grantees.

It calls on the Foundation, its grantees and other allies to play **multiple roles**. The Foundation is seen as more than just a conduit for funding. It could leverage its resources in a variety of ways to support the evolution and growth of the movement, for example convening and sharing information and connecting groups and individuals to one another. There is also a significant need for spiritual uplift in the face of tough odds, providing in the words of one participant “mutual praise for each other.”

The mission statement also positions the Foundation to pursue **cultural/systems change**. Unlike many other funders, it has the potential to focus on the “big picture” that cuts across traditional program silos to foster cross-issue, potentially game-changing alliances. That kind of effort calls on the Foundation to take risks, go against the odds and embrace the possibility of failure. It has the potential to provide critical support for those who think differently and courageously. Often the most original ideas will come from smaller, emerging groups who are not “the usual suspects.” In the words of one participant, “laying the groundwork for cultural change is not unlike creating the conditions for wild fires, which though disruptive serve a critical function in the renewal of an ecosystem.”

A focus on changing the culture and the dominant discourse also challenges the Foundation to **take the long view**. This kind of work takes sustained effort over a period of years, and it requires different measures for success rather than the typical foundation fixation on short-term tactical goals (which also tend to reinforce the existing system). The development of different standards to measure effectiveness in social change work is an area where the Foundation can lead. Even if its grantees don't achieve their goals, the assumption should not be that they have failed. Rather, the Foundation needs to set the tone for long-term strategic campaigns by asking instead "are we moving in the right direction?"

What will success look like?

In the words of one participant, "Compton" will become a verb. It will characterize a way of working that is **closely attuned to the landscape**. The Foundation will be known for its authentic relationships and for its ability to listen. It will craft its strategy in sync with the changing context (e.g. Occupy) and provide a timely response to what is happening on the ground.

The Foundation will find and support **people in the interstices** between red and blue, not just the usual friends and partners. It will help to elicit their own language to address the challenges ahead, and release us from the rigidity of predominant "doomsday" stories. The Foundation will promote more permeable membranes between issue areas, providing more time for ideas to percolate and more opportunities for transformation.

The Foundation will also capture and share **positive stories of moral courage** that inspire action. The participants observed that we need stories of real life role models who are making a difference. The Foundation can build on the legacy of church-based activists who shared powerful stories about how to be in the world. These stories will provide a different narrative from mainstream media and directly demonstrate actions that individuals can take. They will encourage aspirations and build power while taking care to avoid damage to the storytellers.

Above all, the Foundation will fund great people and ideas that **inspire and motivate action** that might not have happened otherwise. It will trust its grantees to fulfill their missions in ways that are not easy to document. As one participant asked, how do you measure profound outcomes like love? The Foundation can build the ability of its allies to tell their stories, not abandoning linear approaches like logic models and log frames, but combining the best of multiple methods of assessment to support a larger vision of impact.

Our grantees and friends would also like to see the Foundation **transform philanthropy**. It will not be acting in isolation, but will engage its peers in authentic social change work. By the Foundation's actions, it can promote deeper relationships

and a more “open space” approach to philanthropy that can subtly but directly influence the strategies and approaches employed by its peers.

What is transformative leadership?

“Is this really something different?” one participant asked, “Or are we actually talking about repackaging the work grantees are already doing to fit the Foundation’s new look?” There was general agreement across the conversations that the Foundation is looking for something that is qualitatively different from conventional individualistic models of leadership, and that one of its challenges will be providing sufficient definition while also leaving room for creative interpretation. How the Foundation chooses to act will constitute the clearest modeling of transformative leadership by example.

It is leadership forged in a transformative process (see Robert Gass on [What Is Transformation?](#)). As one participant put it, “We’re not talking about a simple transformation from vanilla to chocolate. It’s more akin to a change from vanilla to music.” Another used the metaphor of putting water through a purifying filter. It is changed...better even... but still water. Contrast that with the application of sufficient heat to transform water into steam.

What are the qualities of a transformative leader? One of the participants offered a particularly succinct list: mission, not ego-driven; collaborative; demonstrated impact; vision of what they want to accomplish; driven to learn and grow; and interested in engaging beyond silos.

A transformative leader is also someone with emotional intelligence and self-awareness who leads “from the inside out,” and her work is grounded in authentic relationships. She also has the ability to transcend the boundaries of specific issue areas and see the linkage between structural and policy change. While she may share characteristics with other effective leaders (e.g. courageous, inspiring, accessible) she is also likely to be a risk taker and someone who “pushes power out,” creating space for others to lead. Ella Baker was cited as a good example of someone who “led from behind” the scenes with young people and also “out front” with the power brokers of the civil rights movement.

There is a built-in tension between encouraging groups and individuals to “lead from behind” and not be concerned if others take the credit vs. the tendency for funders to push for “branding” and to base continued funding on clearly demonstrated success. As already noted, if the Foundation is serious about promoting this form of leadership, it will also need to pioneer more appropriate, albeit less conventional ways of gauging impact.

Should the Foundation find and support those who are already demonstrating transformative leadership or should it help to support the infrastructure to develop the next generation? To use a biological metaphor suggested by one of our participants, is the Foundation likely to have the greatest influence as a pollinator or an attractor? There is a case to be made for both strategies.

The Foundation could “create a tent for those who are ready to move” with space to fail. It could draw from across its traditional priority areas and help forge and support interconnected networks of learning and reciprocity. The Foundation would employ a flexible approach to the composition of these groups, but focus on those who have demonstrated their ability to collaborate with others in their field. It would also look for participants who could “own up to their own weaknesses” and “know when to hand the work off to others.”

Several participants noted that spiritual practice could be an important bonding agent for these networks. No particular form of practice was recommended, but it was noted that openly addressing the spiritual dimension of the work can help leaders stay grounded around issues of ego and intention. However, we were also cautioned to not replicate the mistakes of other funders who have required “forced intimacy” of their grantees. We need to be conscious of the reality that risk takers are sometimes not well-liked or seen as team players. We don’t want to create situations where they end up choosing to remove themselves from the group and spend their time instead “smoking in the parking lot.”

There is also important work to be done to nurture the next generation of emerging leaders within existing groups and to help them build organizations that don’t revolve around one person. A number of our participants talked about the “unsustainable” nature of the “old” Executive Director position, and bemoaned the lack of available supports for their development (e.g. sabbaticals, coaching, cross-issue peer networks). They also observed that younger people in their organizations are increasingly turning down the opportunity to assume leadership roles because they perceive it as too hard and potentially in conflict with living a balanced life. Moreover, traditional issue-based organizing is frequently seen as a “dead model” by younger people who are seeking to work across issue boundaries on broader questions of social and economic justice. The Foundation can play an important role in reinforcing the notions of shared responsibility and divisions of labor among organizations, and by helping organizations develop a “deeper bench” with broader ownership of leadership.

Given the size of the Foundation’s resources, it’s unlikely it could tackle both the “how” and the “what” of transformative leadership. The participants recommended that the Foundation engage in an ongoing process of exploring the “how.” It has a unique opportunity to promote “intersectionality” and to incentivize change in the contexts in which leadership happens. Ashley Boren’s work with Sustainable Conservation was cited as a prime example of bringing “unlikely bedfellows” together

from across sectors to define common ground. The Foundation can also encourage others to increase their appetite for risk by moving beyond the traditional business/growth models that tend to dominate foundation thinking about scaling good ideas.

What is courageous storytelling?

Change comes when we can visualize what could be, where we want to go, and what systems changes are necessary. But first we need to build a collective sense of the inevitability of change. That's where courageous storytelling comes in. We're at a transformative/evolutionary moment in the history of the planet, but many of the stories we've been telling ourselves are not what's needed right now. One of the most effective forms of leverage the Foundation could exercise is to help change mindsets about the hidden stories that tacitly manifest our basic assumptions about change (e.g. see Donella Meadows' "Leverage Points for Change in Systems").

The Foundation could invite the telling of new stories. The narratives could take the form of personal stories that are emblematic of a deeper truth (e.g. the shoe example in "The Story of Stuff"). Harder to formulate, but potentially more powerful, are stories that connect to archetypes and myths. As a species, we're hard wired to respond to universal themes such as hero stories. It's often difficult for fact-driven folks to think in terms of cultural archetypes, but the more we can learn to channel them, the better (e.g. see Jonah Sachs' Story Wars; Don Beck's Spiral Dynamics).

We were reminded that courage frequently comes with a cost. In many parts of the world, courageous storytellers are subject to persecution, imprisonment, and even assassination. Here in the U.S. we've seen recent examples of the vilification and stigmatization of young women who courageously shared their stories about abortion and contraception. The Foundation needs to be fully conscious of the risks it is asking individuals and organizations to undertake when they are encouraged to courageously speak truth to power.

The Foundation can help create an environment where storytellers can speak honestly and without fear of retribution. We can support space for people to tell their own stories in an authentic way and to give voice to the voiceless. This kind of work might depart from the conventional image of training a "good storyteller." Often it can mean telling stories that others don't want to hear or to give the creator space to delve into topics that aren't the fad of the moment.

One of our participants observed that communications is uni-directional, while storytelling is a multi-directional process. A powerful story operates on multiple levels and can be interpreted in a number of ways. It also opens up the possibility of a variety of interactions between the narrator and her audience(s). Feedback that validates the reality of the storyteller and helps to build a sense of self-efficacy and

personal power can be an important outcome. But even more important from the Foundation's point of view would be to help build the skills of community members to appropriately frame their messages to link to strategic political opportunities and strengthen their collective voice to challenge broader social narratives. Individual stories need to be placed in the larger context of needed systems changes in order to help elucidate power relationships that might otherwise remain invisible.

Who is the story for? Is it to inspire grassroots base building or to influence policymakers? It's important to acknowledge that not everyone can be an effective storyteller. They have to possess the skill to connect with an audience, and different storytellers may be appropriate for different target audiences. There is an important role for "translators" to help frame and communicate stories with appropriate timing. Sometimes those translators can come from unexpected places, such as the role of radio DJs in the immigrant rights movement. There is a good deal of responsibility and power in the translator role, and when the Foundation is supporting that work, we need to ensure that they not speak for others without their permission. Trust is essential if a translator is to represent the story with integrity.

Another role that the Foundation is uniquely positioned to play is to help connect artists to movement activists to collaborate in new ways (e.g. Melanie Cervantes and Just Seeds Artist Collaborative). Creative expression that touches emotions and potentially carries a moral message can be a powerful mechanism to inspire action. As one participant put it, "inspiring hope requires more than fact sheets." There is a need to drill down on how to best use art for organizing (e.g. Fabiana Rodriguez at Art and Social Change).

The Foundation could provide opportunities for interested artists to gain a deeper comprehension of the complexities of particular social and political issues. Meanwhile, activists could also be helped to better understand that artists also need compensation to sustain themselves rather than being constantly asked to donate their work to the cause. Emerging artists were cited as a group that might particularly benefit from these kinds of collaborations. All parties could reap rewards from efforts that bolster organizing while also building audiences. One specific idea that emerged from the conversations was adding a percentage onto grants specifically for collaboration with artists.

Finally, the Foundation could help model and reward what the group called a "culture of generosity" (and humility) in its approach to courageous storytelling. To use Marshall Ganz's term, when we concentrate on telling the "story of WE," success should be measured by the creation and spread of powerful stories, not who gets the credit. No one funder or organization needs to "own" it all. We need to get better at telling our own stories about shared success rather than clambering for individual recognition. As an example, Advocates for Youth gauges its impact by the degree to which its ideas have seeded the work of others. It may never receive direct credit, but

is convinced that “quiet wins” are a critical indicator that its work has been successful.

How can the Foundation incorporate these ideas into its work?

When asked for their advice in translating these conversations into specific suggestions for how the Foundation does its work, our guests had a number of thoughtful observations to share. They kept returning to the basic theme that it’s critically important that the Foundation manifest the values of its new mission statement in everything it does. The Foundation was challenged to act as a transformative leader and courageous storyteller within philanthropy. If the Foundation is to realize its ambitions, it can’t do this work alone. It will also not be a “credible coach” unless it is openly working on its own practice.

These conversations were repeatedly cited as an example of the kind of much-needed dynamic cross-issue dialogue that only the Foundation can initiate. The Foundation was encouraged to make these “cross-fertilizing” conversations regular events to model transformative leadership and courageous storytelling in practice. “Give us this kind of time and space to think together,” they suggested, rather than making it a typical foundation-sponsored convening “hoop to jump through” as a condition of funding.

The Foundation was encouraged to build on its historic commitments to issues and organizations and to remain focused and lean. Its current program priorities are valid and important and an appropriate place to start rather than pursuing a scattershot approach. Building from that base, the Foundation has a unique opportunity to explore “intersectionality.” They invited the Foundation to ask them who the transformative leaders are in their respective fields. Once identified, it should bring them into dialogue with one another to cultivate their skills and engage them in thinking outside their issue silos. Another example is the potential of bringing artists into those conversations as well. There was a general sense that there is a widespread eagerness for those kinds of connections.

Rather than focusing solely on individual leaders, the Foundation was advised to also nurture cohorts or networks (like these conversations) for collaborative problem solving. It was encouraged to provide the introductions and connect them to one another, but then let the participants create the substance of the collaborations. A small but significant contribution to this process might be for the Foundation to make small grants available specifically to bring people together with the goal of allowing ideas to emerge.

When it comes to grantmaking, there was a strong consensus across all three conversations that multi-year general support is the most effective way to encourage transformative leadership. Project-specific funding undermines the capacity of

organizations to be truly creative in their thinking and operations. It also doesn't allow groups to effectively leverage their internal strengths in order to work together. The Foundation was called on to have the "courage to sustain things that are working but are not new and shiny" in order to enable long-term risk taking and flexibility to respond to challenges as they emerge.

A special niche for the Foundation might be to provide "early money" for emerging groups and ideas. As one participant put it, "it takes a lot of rubbing sticks together to ignite a flame that is sustainable vs. lighting lots of birthday candles that only last a short time." Reference was made to the "chain of funders" that has developed in the social entrepreneurship arena, where programs like Echoing Green provide initial start-up funding and networking, then Ashoka provides second level developmental funding and capacity building, then larger funders like Skoll provide sustaining dollars. Could a similar "pipeline" be constructed to nurture and support transformative leaders?

Some Final Observations

The Foundation brought together some of the most creative and effective leaders in the social change arena for a stimulating and moving series of conversations. They trusted us enough to tell us the truth. Time and again they reminded us just how hard this work is in the current context, and how much of a difference validation like this can mean to them. They went away inspired and energized and hungry for more dialogue of this sort. It was dramatic evidence of the validity of our new mission.

They are looking to the Foundation to lead by example and to live the bold words of our mission statement. They told us to "trust your gut." It is OK not to change everything. What's most important is to hold true to our commitment to authentic relationships, to thinking deeply and to acting with intention. They also suggested that we have the humility to see that we can't transform philanthropy on our own. They strongly encouraged us to bring other funders into these conversations, to help build the ecosystem of funding for progressive work and to continue to identify opportunities together.

Together we touched the core of transformative leadership in practice. Rather than assuming that only our opponents must change, we all need to ask ourselves about our willingness to give up long-held personal and cultural beliefs and change ourselves. What might we learn if we take off our armor? These initial conversations provided us with some real insight into what we have to gain. The ideas we explored together are all connected. We have a unique opportunity to help bring those pieces together into a whole that is truly greater than the sum of its parts.

Some Possible Discussion Questions

If the Foundation is to model transformative leadership and courageous storytelling and to promote a “culture of generosity” in all its work, what would that look like in practice? Here are a few questions that emerged from the three conversations that warrant further conversation by the staff and board:

Where do we believe power comes from? When we say “we ignite change,” who is “we?” Do we mean the Foundation, its grantees, its allies, community members or all of the above? Does the Foundation intend to provide the fuel, the flame, or both?

If we aspire to ignite change at the systems or cultural level, are we willing to go beyond categorical funding priorities to pursue a strategy of “intersectionality?” We were struck by how few of the participants in our conversations knew each other. They tend to work within their respective issue silos, but they were all excited by the potential of continuing cross-issue dialogue and collaboration. What would it mean for the Foundation to choose that route?

What’s our appetite for risk taking? If we will be encouraging our grantees to act in a transformative and courageous fashion, to what degree are we willing to do the same? Are we comfortable reaching out beyond our familiar circles of the “usual suspects?” Are we prepared to act in a nimble and timely fashion when important events like the Occupy movement emerge? Are we comfortable embracing some of the spiritual and moral dimensions of transformative social change work that were front and center for many of our participants?

Are we prepared to take the long view? Most funders grow restless after three to five years of funding a particular topic or organization, yet our participants urged the Foundation to commit to sustained effort and to employ different, non-traditional measures of success for both our grantees and ourselves. Do we have the vision and patience to nurture the next generation of leaders and, simultaneously, new organizational models that promote a broader ownership of leadership?

Do we aspire to transform philanthropy? What would it take? Are we willing to invite others along on our journey? Would we be comfortable “leading from behind,” unconcerned about whom ultimately gets the credit for positive changes?