

# Changemaking: Building Strategic Competence

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*Keywords:* Changemaking, community change, strategic competence, foundation reputation, staff-board alignment

## Introduction

Philanthropy has a long history of support for efforts to revitalize distressed communities and improve the lives of the children and families who live in them. This history has produced a wealth of knowledge about effective revitalization models, promising program strategies, and lessons learned (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, & Dewar, 2010). At the same time, foundations have increasingly recognized that how they go about this work is as important as what they support. Here, “best practice” is less well defined.

Clearly no single role, style, or set of practices makes sense for every foundation in every community change effort. Good practice reflects a dynamic match between the opportunities and needs in a community and the foundation’s own history, goals, values, operating preferences, and capacities, as well as those of its partners. However, as Patrizi and Thompson suggest, foundations typically spend more time developing their program strategies than clarifying the roles they will play and how they will function as strategy is executed:

For foundations to go beyond the rhetoric of being more than ‘bankers,’ they need to be far clearer about what they do and the capacities they need that can add value to advance strategy. (2011, p. 57).

This challenge coincides with another trend in philanthropy that urges foundations to utilize

## Key Points

- Foundations have begun to recognize that **how** they go about their work is as important as **what** they support. To be better armed to address the urgent challenges facing Detroit’s children, the Skillman Foundation has adopted a changemaking role that draws upon and leverages its knowledge, networks, and civic reputation to supplement its grantmaking investments.
- Effective changemaking depends on the accrual of trust and respect that is built over time in relationships with community residents and stakeholders, public and private partners, and others with influence and resources.
- Changemaking required the foundation to build new strategic competencies such as working across traditionally siloed grantmaking programs, adding evaluation and learning staff, and increasing communication and alignment between board and staff.
- Ten lessons for foundations that want to assume a changemaking role are offered, including paying attention to local context and political realities, understanding and managing the dynamics of credit and control, and communicating clearly and inviting feedback about the foundation’s goals so that its strategies are informed by a timely and nuanced understanding of potential partners’ interests and needs.

their full range of assets – knowledge, networks, credibility, and political capital, as well as their financial resources – to advance their missions (Auspos, Brown, Kubisch, & Sutton, 2009; Bal-

lard, 2007; Crutchfield, Kania, & Kramer, 2011).

Effective place-based funders, especially embedded foundations working in their own hometowns (Karlström, Brown, Chaskin, & Richman, 2009), typically establish rich and trusting networks of relationships that position them to add value through taking on roles besides grantmaker: They draw attention to pressing community needs, convene, collaborate, leverage, solve problems, mobilize, advocate, and build and share knowledge. Few other civic actors have the independence, the patient and flexible resources, and the intellectual and political capital to assume these roles for the public good. Consistently adding real value, however, can be extraordinarily complex, requiring a daunting mix of strategic skills, entrepreneurial stance, and staying power.

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This article examines the Skillman Foundation's efforts to add value to its work through what it calls "changemaking." Changemaking refers here to roles and practices beyond grantmaking through which a foundation advances its goals. Skillman staff view grantmaking and changemaking as intimately connected: grant resources are "what give us our standing" and allow them to "access a portfolio of changemaking tools beyond money for advancing our agenda." Indeed, part of managing a grants program is thinking about "how changemaking practices might increase or extend the impact of the grants." Changemaking is the "connective tissue that helps create more powerful outcomes from heretofore unconnected and unleveraged strategies." It is a tool – like

grantmaking, knowledge management, and strategic communications – through which to exert influence, leverage resources and partnerships, and work toward scale.

A foundation aiming to deploy changemaking strategies to add value to its community change work faces at least two tasks. The first is simply reaching clarity – internally and with partners – about how the foundation will do the work and what roles it will play. By specifying the strategic rationale for these roles in the change effort, the foundation in effect defines itself as a player in the larger theory of change or framework guiding the effort. The second task is identifying the skills, expertise, and organizational will it has or will need to develop internally to effectively implement and be accountable for its chosen roles. This is what Patrizi and Thompson (2011) call a foundation's "strategic competence" to deliver value to the work.

The Skillman Foundation's recent work in Detroit affords a timely opportunity to examine change-making practice. Since the middle of the last decade, Skillman has by design transitioned from being a fairly traditional grantmaker to one that aims to increase its impact through changemaking. By setting concrete goals for its own performance and including assessment of this performance in the overall evaluation of its work, the foundation has signaled a welcome transparency from which it and others can learn.

This article aims to capture the foundation's initial lessons about changemaking practice by examining how one foundation with a genuine desire to expand the range and scope of its own practice is building its strategic competence, and by highlighting what it is learning that is likely to be of interest to other foundations with similar changemaking goals. The findings reported here are based on 25 confidential interviews with Skillman staff, leadership, trustees, partners, and philanthropic colleagues<sup>2</sup> as well as the author's observations as an evaluation consultant to the

<sup>1</sup> See below for an explanation of the sources of quotes.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from the interviews are not attributed to individual respondents in order to encourage candid reflection and ensure confidentiality.

foundation over the last several years.

The focus here is on lessons about changemaking practice rather than on the empirical links between changemaking and the foundation's intended outcomes. Nonetheless, although it is too early to evaluate the ultimate success of the foundation's approach, a recent synthesis of evaluation reports from the 2006-2010 Planning and Readiness phases of the work concludes that the foundation has laid the groundwork for the initiative's full-scale implementation (Fiester, 2011). For example, it reports that the foundation has

- cultivated trust, overcome skepticism, forged new partnerships and alliances, and established resident-stakeholder partnerships in each of its six target neighborhoods;
- helped create many of the requisite conditions for school and education-system reform, such as a vision, plan, and infrastructure for citywide school reform; a common language and accessible data; more and better school options; improvements to teaching capacity; and processes for improving existing schools;
- established new hubs of co-located youth services in the target neighborhoods;
- leveraged other funds for neighborhood transformation, exceeding its 5:1 target; and
- created a new way of working internally, including many best practices associated with being a learning organization.

These initial outcomes suggest the promise of a changemaking approach. The next section describes how the foundation went about building its strategic competence as a changemaker.

### Building Connections and Credibility as a Changemaker

Established in 1960, the Skillman Foundation's mission is to improve the lives of children in Detroit.<sup>3</sup> After many years of operating as a largely responsive grantmaker investing in education and child and family programs and strategies in

metropolitan Detroit, the foundation's leadership decided to restructure its work in two fundamental ways in order to increase its impact:

*By drawing upon and leveraging these resources – its staff and board networks, deep local knowledge, civic reputation, professional expertise, access to national resources, and political capital – it would be better armed to address the urgent challenges facing children and families in Detroit.*

- First, it would target its resources in six neighborhoods where, collectively, about 30 percent of Detroit's children live. Launched in 2006, Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools/Good Opportunities constitutes a 10-year, \$100 million commitment involving neighborhood and youth development, school improvement, and system-change strategies that aim to ensure that children living in the six targeted neighborhoods are safe, healthy, well educated and prepared for adulthood.
- Second, the foundation would make more concerted use of the nongrantmaking resources at its disposal in order to become a more powerful voice for children. By drawing upon and leveraging these resources – its staff and board networks, deep local knowledge, civic reputation, professional expertise, access to national resources, and political capital – it would be better armed to address the urgent challenges facing children and families in Detroit.

The foundation believed that by limiting its primary focus to six target neighborhoods but complementing its grantmaking with more intentional changemaking strategies, it could demonstrate improved outcomes for children and reach for scale in its impact over time. Founda-

<sup>3</sup> For more information about the foundation's history and current work, see [www.skillman.org](http://www.skillman.org). The foundation's 2012 grants budget is about \$18 million and its staff numbers about 30.

tion leadership determined that to be an effective changemaker, it needed strong partnerships on the ground and the ability to engage those who have money, influence and power. Such relationships are not unique to the Skillman Foundation, but, consistently established in multiple venues over time, they are at the core of how the foundation approached adding value as a changemaker.

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#### *Building Partnerships With Neighborhood Residents and Stakeholders*

The foundation began its work in the six target neighborhoods with the assumption that staff would need to get to know and be known by residents and stakeholders. Like other foundations trying to work in partnership with low-income communities, Skillman faced the challenge of building trust across class and, sometimes, racial/ethnic lines. A close observer describes the foundation’s approach:

The best thing they did at the beginning was to show up with full force at all the community planning meetings in each neighborhood. They got there early, left late. They allowed themselves to become a part of the community. They were not afraid of residents known to be “difficult” or residents who were always complaining – “how come you’re doing it this way or why can’t you ...?”. They weren’t afraid of the hard questions. [Foundation leadership] would say: “We acknowledge that we have the money and therefore we have the power. But there’s something called the abuse of power that we don’t want to practice. Whenever you feel that we abuse our power, I want you to call me, and here’s my number.” Essentially, the foundation gave permission to the community

to bring its true self into the space that Skillman also occupied without having to communicate in a certain way because that’s what the foundation wants or that’s the way the foundation wants to hear it.

The foundation’s multiple strategies to engage residents and stakeholders and develop a deep and sophisticated knowledge of neighborhood context built its credibility and earned the respect of many philanthropic colleagues. One funder noted that foundations in Detroit have

very few “listening” venues so we tend to fall back on deciding what neighborhood folks need. ... We’re trying to change that attitude, and Skillman’s work has helped because they have demonstrated the listening role to a level that most of us haven’t seen here before. If you listen long enough, people really talk to you and then you learn a lot and can work more easily together. But it’s easier said than done.

Skillman’s consistent investment in resident engagement also helped build its own partnership skills and weather the inevitable misunderstandings, competing priorities, and even conflicts that arise in long-term foundation partnerships with communities. Foundation missteps, for example, around the integration of Skillman’s schools and neighborhood strategies on the ground (described below) might have been junctures at which trust between the foundation and residents and stakeholders could have been severely undermined – as has been the case, irredeemably so, elsewhere (Brown & Fiester, 2007; FSG Social Impact Advisors, 2011). Residents might have felt “double crossed” by a powerful institution that professed empowerment but insisted on heretofore-unspecified priorities. But the resilience of the relationship – the accrual of trust and respect that is built over time – enabled them to resolve differences and move forward together. Genuine respect forms the core of the foundation’s approach:

We go out to the community and say “this is what we think and why,” and then we listen. If people don’t agree with our approach, we challenge and problem solve and deliberate with them. Sometimes our approach changes as a result, sometimes not. It’s not a consensus-building strategy, but a respect strategy. I am not trying to build community support for

what we are doing, I am trying to build community understanding and maintain mutual respect and transparency. They may want to join us, but that's not the primary goal."

As it was building its credibility in the target neighborhoods, the foundation also worked to develop its connections to people and institutions outside of the neighborhood that have resources, influence, and power.

### *Building Networks and Collaborations*

To play a credible changemaking role for Detroit's youth, Skillman had to strengthen the platform from which it could engage others and help align their interests in ways that would benefit youth. The question was not whether multiple players are needed, but first, how to engage them and, secondly, how to build the structures and processes through which they can be sufficiently aligned to "move the needle" over time. Money alone could not define the foundation's platform or establish its credibility as a civic player. As another funder noted, "you have to walk into the room with nonfinancial credibility. If you don't have that you are constantly marginalized as just a funder." Skillman's reputation would be a key lever of change, constituting the "soft power" (Stannard-Stockton, 2010) it could bring to the table along with its financial resources.

Although Skillman had long been embedded in citywide public/private/nonprofit networks, foundation leadership knew it would need to deepen these relationships and expand their scope – with critical attention to those with resources, influence, ideas, and leadership – in order to address its ambitious goals. The foundation's staff would need both to learn from and to bring nonfinancial value to these networks. Toward that end, experts in various areas were invited to learning sessions at the foundation where staff examined lessons and best practices from past initiatives and debated new ideas. Foundation leadership was particularly intentional about building relationships with various federal officials and agencies: attending conferences and special meetings, working with key supporters who could facilitate or advance these relationships, following up on referrals, and serving as the local host for visits to Detroit by

various federal officials. Its investment in educating federal officials and the foundation community about work under way in Detroit, alongside its efforts to coordinate and support local efforts to attract national resources to the city, increasingly positioned the foundation as an effective broker for many efforts involving national partners, both public and private.

Management also encouraged staff to participate

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in professional associations, attend conferences, join collaborations, and think strategically about what other venues would provide opportunities for learning and relationship-building related to the foundation's goals. An inventory of staff participation in such venues reveals formal, often leadership, roles in a rich and diverse array of local and national organizations and task forces: affinity groups of funders, cross-sector issue groups, nonprofit boards and advisory groups, government-appointed task forces, and learning groups. Despite limited travel budgets and time constraints, staff visibility – as key speakers, panelists, and planning committee members – at both local and national conferences and meetings grew in scale and prominence. Foundation staff increasingly conducted briefings for the mayor and council members and met frequently with city and state officials to provide counsel regarding key issues on the foundation's agenda.

Over time, staff played significant leadership roles in a range of local collaborative enterprises like the Detroit Youth Employment Consortium and the African-American and Hispanic Boys Initiative. These collaborations drew upon and expanded the foundation's networks and reputation,



further strengthening the platforms from which it could advance its agenda for youth. Sometimes Skillman played the lead role and sometimes followed others' lead. As one program officer commented, "You have to know when to be at the front of the parade and when, for reasons of history, board politics, expertise, or some other idiosyncratic factor, it's best for someone else to lead."

*Integrating place-based strategies across traditionally siloed grantmaking programs, for example, is notoriously challenging.*

At times foundation staff assume a "silent partner" developmental role:

First, we have to do the unsexy work helping to get the neighborhood ready for investment – organizing residents, making sure everyone gets a seat at the table, helping leaders resolve old conflicts, building organizational capacity. Then other funders can come in and fund specific programs or organizations that fit well with their missions.

Organized communities attract resources because outside investors have some confidence that their resources will be put to good use. All the foundation's "pre-partnership" organizing work, both grantmaking and changemaking, helped lay the groundwork for these investors.

#### *Building Internal Capacity and Alignment*

At the same time as it was deepening its connections in the target neighborhoods, citywide, and nationally, foundation leadership recognized the need for internal changes to support the new roles and practices that staff were being challenged to play. Job descriptions were restructured to reduce program silos, flexible work schedules were instituted to accommodate the evening and weekend work required for community engagement, and annual staff reviews included more attention to professional development plans related to the foundation's new agenda. The foundation's

communications capacity was expanded, and its grants-management system was revised to reflect a new coding system linked to the foundation's new goals and operating framework. Two staff positions were added: a knowledge management officer to oversee evaluation and learning and a special projects officer to focus on changemaking (Brown, Colombo, & Hughes, 2009).

Building organizational alignment internally takes years, not months. Integrating place-based strategies across traditionally siloed grantmaking programs, for example, is notoriously challenging. Staff in each program area typically has its own expertise, goals and strategies, budget and, sometimes, culture and operating style. As the Skillman Foundation focused its work on six target neighborhoods, its challenge became one of integrating a place-based approach – Good Neighborhoods – with its citywide program – Good Schools. As reported by both foundation staff and outside observers, this challenge came into stark relief at a 2008 meeting at a high school in one of the foundation's six neighborhoods.

Over the previous year, foundation staff had laid important groundwork for a school reform agenda but it had failed to make sure the Good Schools and Good Neighborhoods program staff spent enough time (1) talking with each other within the foundation and (2) communicating a shared agenda to school personnel, residents and neighborhood stakeholders.

As a result, just before the meeting, a flyer was distributed in the neighborhood encouraging people to "Stop the Skillman Foundation Takeover of the Cody High School." Caught off guard without sound information, parents and teachers expected the worst. As foundation staff observed, "we didn't practice our values here. In Good Neighborhoods we had learned to be respectful and transparent, but this very difficult meeting signaled to us that we had to do a better job of applying these values to our Good Schools work."

Having owned its mistake publicly, the foundation invited parents and stakeholders to attend neighborhood meetings in which the foundation's president and vice president, as well as program staff, talked

about the goals for its schools work and helped generate a collective understanding about next steps for crafting a strategy that was then implemented over the next year with a great deal of support from all quarters.

To build internal integration of Good Neighborhoods and Good Schools, the foundation put in place both formal structures like regular senior program officer team meetings and informal processes for neighborhood and schools staff to share information and shape strategies across programs. A critical element of what is experienced as a “huge shift” inside the foundation is a recurring informal lunch meeting where staff update each other and build camaraderie across program silos. One staff person noted that “it is clear to everyone in the field that the schools and neighborhood work must be inextricably linked; we’re just figuring out within the foundation exactly how to make that work. We’re not 100 percent there but we’ve gone a very long way.” Another reported, “We have built a staff team that now knows that we have each other’s backs. That’s what you do for your colleagues inside the foundation and what you do for your partners outside.”

The task of integrating schools and neighborhood work is very much a work in progress. The larger point here is that the foundation recognized that building its own strategic competence – an integrated program platform internally – was key to achieving its goals in the community.

A parallel evolution took place at the board level. Over time new trustees were invited to join the board, with priority given to extending the foundation’s reach into new communities and key centers of power within the community as well as bringing on new expertise regarding its goals. Trustees engaged in a series of learning opportunities, visiting other community change efforts around the country, holding meetings in the target neighborhoods, and participating in special meetings and annual retreats. A high level of communication helped the staff and board align their goals and expectations and create a culture of candid exchange and debate. Staff leadership typically contacts trustees monthly, more if necessary, to keep them current and make sure they are not surprised by something in the media

or a call from a peer influential. For example, staff reported recently that

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what we wanted, but the trustees were not put in bad positions out in the community – they got weekly emails, they knew what was happening, and were never caught by surprise. It was important for them to get accurate information from us so they could interpret whatever negative spin they heard elsewhere.

Staff-trustee relations reflect a great deal of mutual trust, which is particularly important for effective changemaking because both the staff and trustees are active players, leveraging their own networks to advance the foundation’s agenda.

#### *Developing Effective Leveraging Roles and Practices*

The foundation set a goal for itself of leveraging \$5 for every \$1 it invested in Good Neighborhoods. It set up a bookkeeping system that tracked these funds and divided them into two groups: funds leveraged primarily through the foundation’s grants and those leveraged through its changemaking influence. From 2007 to 2010, the foundation’s investment of \$48 million in Good Neighborhoods leveraged \$303 million, for a return rate of \$6.3:1. About 60 percent of the funds were leveraged through grants; the rest resulted from foundation staff and board change-making efforts.

The actual work of leverage entailed a range of practices: sharing information; providing technical assistance; lending the foundation’s name; making strategic phone calls to get key people to

the table to work together; hiring consultants or lending staff to help a state or city department or group of nonprofits navigate the federal application process; negotiating complex turf issues among competing organizations to increase their likelihood of attracting and effectively managing outside funds; and helping potential partners to see how investing in Detroit generally, and in Detroit's youth more specifically, could help them achieve their goals.

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Serving as an effective broker between a neighborhood and outside resources is a familiar practice for foundations embedded in their communities. Like other changemaking strategies that add value, it depends to a great extent on the foundation's reputation as a trustworthy and respected partner. But even successful leveraging is not without its complexities. Issues of ownership and control seem almost inevitable – and very human. As one program officer noted,

We need partners and champions, not for our work but for our goals. That's a tension that we struggle with. It would be nice to have champions that do exactly what we tell them to do. But that's not how it works.

Another described a natural response to sharing leadership: “When we spend so long getting something started, we're tempted to feel as if we own it. It's hard to let go even though we know that's exactly what we want – other funders who get invested.” And collaboration requires adjust-

ments: “Management is very happy if I leverage another funder's resources for our initiative but is less than enthusiastic about modifying our approach to be truly collaborative.”

Successful leveraging also requires astute relationship management. One observer reported that “The foundation's positive reputation can sometimes make it difficult for collaborators to work side-by-side with Skillman because it has such brand recognition, people attribute all good things to them and don't take our role seriously.” Further, as the foundation is increasingly viewed as a trusted community broker, staff

worries about all the relationships we broker in the community and sharing accountability with so many partners. If our partners act irresponsibly, the community looks to us and says “you brought them here.” It's especially hard with national foundations that are not going to be around for long. So we have to think hard about how to use our social capital wisely.

Trust that led to leveraged dollars can erode if the new resources do not result in well-implemented activities and, ultimately, desired outcomes.

### Changemaking: Initial Lessons From Practice

Over time, the foundation went about building its strategic competence for changemaking – its knowledge, reputation for adding value, credibility among residents and local actors as well as those outside of Detroit, and its internal capacity to support effective changemaking. Such an approach is not unique to Skillman, nor entirely new to philanthropy. What is new for Skillman is the way changemaking has become consistent practice, broadening the business, as one program officer put it, from “grantmaking to doing whatever it takes” to improve the lives of children in Detroit. This shift both broadens the scope of the philanthropic enterprise and elevates the foundation's reputation and network of relationships as essential ingredients to its success.

Foundation staff underscores the iterative nature of its learning process, fueled by missteps as well as successes, over a period of years, not months.



Respondents both in and outside of the foundation suggest the following initial lessons for other philanthropies aiming to work in this way.

1. **Adapt changemaking practice to local context.** Changemaking is highly context specific. As one respondent said: “The same philanthropic behavior that might be welcomed as bold leadership in a community with a weak nonprofit and civic infrastructure might be seen as competitive and power hungry in another community.” The foundation, for example, has stepped up in a big way to address Detroit’s education challenges (McDonald, 2011) in the absence of civic leadership typical in other cities: a mayor who calls an education summit, a university that engages with the school system, political forces that clean up a corrupt school board, a corporate community that invests in reform. Until recently, Detroit’s economic, political, and racial dynamics have discouraged these typical civic responses. Good practice requires deep knowledge of context and the flexibility to adapt change-making roles and activities to that context as it changes over time.
2. **Communicate clearly and consistently about the foundation’s goals and strategies and invite feedback continuously.** Foundations are often viewed as insular and insulated from normal feedback loops and market responses. Changemaking requires just the opposite: frequent communication about the foundation’s goals and strategies and an ongoing invitation for critique and constructive input. This is not passive transparency, but a much more active checking in with multiple parties with diverse views and competing interests. While a foundation may go it alone in the short run, its legitimacy as a change-maker erodes if it fails to understand how others view its work and adjust its strategy accordingly. Checking in regularly, especially with people outside the philanthropic sector, can help protect the foundation from strategies that are unsound, unnecessarily risky, or uninformed by current thinking and political realities.
3. **Take the time to invest in relationships as a key part of the work.** Building, maintaining, and replenishing changemaking relationships and networks requires substantial time and effort, everything – in the Skillman case – from having a regular presence in the neighborhoods and participating in various city and state forums to following up with federal officials met at a national meeting and sitting on local and national boards. While foundation leadership wisely stresses “relentless prioritization” in order to meet its goals, it also knows that success will depend on a wide range of relationships through which the work will get done. The links between these relationships and the foundation’s immediate goals may be indirect, unexpected, or only materialize some time down the road. Relationships with people outside of typical philanthropic networks, for example, may become unexpectedly useful in providing the reconnaissance and support needed to take advantage of a new opportunity. Or, being responsive to a foundation colleague’s need for a funding partner even though the work is not in an area of highest priority to the foundation may be important to maintaining effective collegial relationships that, in turn, can be leveraged later.
4. **Inform changemaking strategies with a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of potential partners’ interests and motivations.** Any community change effort – but especially one that challenges existing power relations – necessarily produces resistance, whether from a neighborhood resident who feels his gatekeeper status threatened, a school principal who has concerns about engaging parents in a partnership, a government official

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who would prefer to operate less transparently, or another funder who is comfortable in its siloed niche. Sometimes the resistance is expressed publicly, other times it comes in the form of paralysis or lack of response. Even when key players’ interests overlap, the timing may not be right, the necessary institutional capacity or leadership may not be in place, or public demand may be low. A foundation with an effective changemaking strategy establishes clarity about its own goals at the same time that it develops a deep analysis of the interests that motivate other individuals, groups, and organizations within the community. Staying exquisitely attuned to these dynamics helps the changemaker identify and act upon areas of mutual self-interest when they emerge. Put bluntly by one funder, “you can get thrown under the bus if you can’t communicate your own self-interests, based on real internal agreement, and what you are willing and unwilling to do to get to your goals.”

5. **Recruit and train staff who have or can develop effective relationship skills.** Although substantive knowledge of the various fields involved in community change is clearly an asset, respondents placed special value on well-developed interpersonal and organizational skills. “The temptation as a funder is to start dictating outcomes and terms and conditions,” said one. “But if you’re wearing your

civic leader hat, it’s all about finding common ground so you can move forward together. This is quite a different skill set.” Changemaking is hard work psychologically and politically, as well as technically, and requires finely honed listening and assessment skills, a sense of timing and pace, ability to navigate group dynamics and organizational development, political acumen, and effective communication with all kinds of community stakeholders. Besides drawing upon a range of professional development strategies like coaching and workshops, the foundation was able to create a culture that helped staff identify gaps in skills and to reward learning.

6. **Understand and manage the dynamics of credit and control.** When responsibilities and accountabilities are widely distributed, as they often are in community change efforts, it is difficult to establish “who leveraged whom,” with whom the local city newspaper reporter should talk for a lead story, or who is accountable when something goes wrong. Foundations are not used to broad partnerships – as opposed to very specific, bilateral grant-related agreements – or evaluations in which their own performance is assessed as part of the larger mix. One funder contended: “Those who have learned to give away credit have moved the needle the most.” Most importantly, each foundation has to shape its changemaking niche to be consonant with its own needs and capacities regarding credit and control.
7. **Keep the mission and goals front and center while navigating political terrain.** The Skillman Foundation is a widely respected voice for children in Detroit. Although the foundation has made public mistakes and not everyone agrees with its strategies, few question the foundation’s commitment or motives. “People in Detroit believe we do it for kids – they may not agree with our specific choices of how but they don’t doubt our commitment,” said one respondent. This is a very important perception in a city where mayors, school superintendents and other public offi-

cials have come and gone, often under a cloud of suspicion or, minimally, misunderstanding. The foundation has worked in some form with many of these officials – for example, a former mayor who developed his own neighborhood initiative or a school superintendent with an investment in lifting up high-quality data about the schools. Working on behalf of children at any meaningful scale means that government cannot be ignored. However, the foundation did not “go down” with the mayor when he was arrested or with the school superintendent when she was fired. Foundation leadership underscores the distinction between working to help Detroit’s leaders do their jobs better and allegiance to individual officials. As one respondent observed: “We always frame our relationship as ‘we’re with you as long as you stand for children.’ We have no permanent allies or enemies. Our constituency is kids, not the school system or the mayor’s office.” This stance – and all the carefully crafted behavior required to operationalize it – has helped minimize the foundation’s vulnerability to being tarnished by negative political critiques.

8. **Think carefully about where authority and responsibility for changemaking is best lodged within the foundation.** A foundation’s ability to create change depends a great deal on its reputation, but doing it badly erodes this important asset. Foundation leadership has to have confidence that staff using changemaking strategies understands the ethos of the foundation and the risks it is willing and unwilling to take, has the skills to do the work well, and can coordinate with each other. Staff need to feel empowered to act and to be taken seriously in the community, but also clear about when and how to bring decisions about changemaking strategy and activities to management for review and approval. The Skillman Foundation’s staffing model evolved alongside its experience with changemaking, moving from a centralized to a more distributed model where all program staff takes on changemaking roles that are coordinated and supported by a senior

program officer for changemaking. The goal is to adapt its decision-making processes and structures to support timely, sound decisions about changemaking strategies and promote feedback loops and learning among all staff over time.

*A foundation’s ability to create change depends a great deal on its reputation, but doing it badly erodes this important asset.*

9. **Align staff and board leadership.** Although a foundation’s reputation depends on many factors, the deep esteem in which Skillman’s current leadership is held generates a huge supply of social and political capital that can be used for changemaking in Detroit. The talents of individual leaders, as well as their deep roots in the community, really matter. But beyond specific individuals, the alignment between the board and the staff creates a platform for changemaking that is unusually strong in the Skillman Foundation’s case. The field can point to many examples of community change work that was undermined because staff and board expectations were not aligned regarding the pace of change or how its progress would be measured. Given predictable board and staff changes over the life of a long-term community change effort, this alignment needs regular attention – one dimension of which is determining how to use board expertise, access to key networks, and behind-the-scenes ability to get things done to best advantage at different stages of the work.
10. **Prioritize and select changemaking roles after a careful assessment of the existing or potential roles of other organizations and individuals in the community.** Because changemaking work has few boundaries – there are always more people to meet, task forces to join, campaigns to wage – founda-

*Because changemaking work has few boundaries – there are always more people to meet, task forces to join, campaigns to wage – foundations committed to doing “whatever it takes” to advance their agendas are necessarily faced with challenges involving pace and scope.*

tions committed to doing “whatever it takes” to advance their agendas are necessarily faced with challenges involving pace and scope. Not surprisingly, Skillman staff expresses some concern about maintaining the quality of its work at the foundation’s current pace. While keeping their own priorities and capacities in mind – in order to stay effective (and sane) and in order to strengthen the entire community’s civic capacity – foundations need to ask: When do we take the lead on a role or activity ourselves, when is another community actor better positioned to do so (even if it is not done exactly the way we would prefer), and when do we do it together? When do we invest in the long-term strategy of building others’ capacities to do the work and what role, if any, do we play in the meantime? How long do we stay engaged in an enterprise we have started in order to maximize the likelihood of sustainability while avoiding perceptions by partners of either being abandoned if we disengage too quickly or being controlled if we disengage too slowly? These questions go to the heart of how to use limited foundation staff time and energy for maximum community impact.

## Conclusion

Patrizi and Thompson (2011) call for foundations to “wrestle with what their real value is and develop the adaptive capacities to hone their competence at delivering that value.” As part of its agenda to improve outcomes for youth in six

neighborhoods in Detroit, the Skillman Foundation has worked hard to develop the competencies and internal structures needed for effective changemaking practice. In the process it has developed and leveraged a host of productive relationships and networks and deepened its repertoire of strategies for advancing its goals, including its grantmaking.

As foundations broaden their strategies to include changemaking and move out of siloed programs, they inevitably become more attuned to the interdependence of different change efforts and their collective potential for greater impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011). The task becomes less one of picking and owning the “right” strategy than of finding ways to operate from strength in concert with other public and private players with common or overlapping goals. This means building new structures for accountability and responsibility, new vehicles and supports for aligning contributions, and new leadership with collaborative skills (Meehan & Reinelt, 2010). This may also lead foundations to move beyond standalone initiatives as the preferred vehicles for addressing complex problems and promoting long-term change (Kubisch et al., 2010). Functioning as an embedded funder within a dynamic community ecology calls instead for a more adaptive and open-ended, strategic partner role. Different parts of the work proceed along different timelines, shifting political and economic conditions create new barriers and opportunities, and a foundation’s relationships in the community evolve outside of an initiative structure. Reframing the effort as a new way of doing business among all key actors does not have to undermine a sense of urgency or reduce the collective pressure to achieve specific results during specified time periods. Rather, it can broaden the landscape in which to develop multiple well-anchored and legitimate community platforms for guiding change and achieving results.

Fulton and her colleagues believe the most successful funders in the next decade will “combine long-standing instincts toward independent initiative and action with an emerging ‘network’ mindset and toolkit that helps them see their work as part of a larger, diverse, and more power-

ful effort overall” (Fulton, Kasper, & Kibbe, 2010, p. 9). Effective changemaking involves bringing foundations’ most creative and entrepreneurial assets to the civic problem-solving table and helping create the conditions under which significant social change can take place. Adding value is a process of learning and adaptation for which philanthropy – at least in theory – is ideally suited.

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