

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

*Informing and inspiring leaders of social change*

## Foundations

# Listening to the Community to Reimagine How a Foundation Delivers on Its Mission

Based on feedback from community listening sessions and consultations with local experts, The San Francisco Foundation reshaped its grantmaking strategy and role in addressing the inequities facing Bay Area residents.

By **Fred Blackwell** | Dec. 12, 2018

For those of us who live in the San Francisco Bay Area and consider ourselves progressive, it is past time to come to terms with our inconvenient truth: We have a race problem. Arriving at this truth and examining how a community foundation could address it became an exercise in melding data on the issues with feedback from our community and experts on racial equity and economic inclusion.

While we live in the dark blue region of a blue state, we are not directly embroiled in the more visible battles around race, such as debates on whether confederate statues should sit in public spaces. But our perception of ourselves as progressive conflicts with the outcomes experienced by low-income people and persons of color when it comes to issues ranging from educational achievement and economic mobility to housing affordability, health, or involvement with the criminal justice system. Addressing the reality of racial discrimination has led The San Francisco Foundation to adopt an equity agenda to advance racial equity and economic inclusion at a regional scale.

## The Power of Feedback



In this multimedia series, sponsored by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, voices from the social sector will offer tactics, tools, and advice gleaned from the grassroots to encourage nonprofits and foundations to make listening to their constituents—and acting on what they hear—a smart norm for any organization committed to improvement.



For funders seeking to refresh their engagement strategies, we share the approaches we adopted to listen, consult, and use feedback to reshape our grantmaking strategy and the foundation's role in addressing inequities facing Bay Area residents.



The San Francisco Community Foundation CEO Fred Blackwell attends one of the community listening sessions. (Photo courtesy of The San Francisco Foundation)

## Listening to the Community

Data can provide a starting place to get a clear picture of a community's most defining challenges. In our case, we commissioned research to provide an **equity profile of the Bay Area**. We had data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, geography, economic status, and more, which brought greater understanding of the disparities facing Bay Area residents. Yet while the data and the human realities behind it were illuminating, they did not point us toward solutions.



*One challenge we have is the fact that if we continue to live in the "twin city of SF," we become the tale of two cities. It's not only about losing diversity, it's also about the spirit and contribution.*

For that, we opened up a dialog with our community partners and listened intently to the people most impacted by the inequities in our region. Listening was critical to reimagining how we delivered on our mission.

(Illustration courtesy of The San Francisco Foundation)

In 2014 we launched a listening initiative called VOICE. VOICE became a series of community focus groups with residents, community leaders, and public officials in the five Bay Area counties the foundation serves. We engaged people in conversation. We asked them questions. And, most important, we listened. What we heard ultimately helped to shape our strategy and an agenda to advance racial equity and economic inclusion for the Bay Area—and it helped us to execute on it.

## Consulting Local Experts

Because we serve five Bay Area counties, we need to understand the challenges facing specific communities. In addition to VOICE, we held consultative sessions where we brought in place-based experts including, policymakers and nonprofit leaders to discuss the issues facing the Bay Area and our role in addressing inequities. The consultative sessions were equally important in assessing our work and giving us feedback on how we were positioned to respond to future challenges. As we got deeper into the process, we focused conversations with community leaders in the Bay Area where the issues of equity were most acute. We asked them: “How did the disparities become so acute in your community?” and “How can we work together on a solution?” Their responses were essential in helping focus our work. Those conversations led us to concepts of People, Place, and Power as important organizing pathways for how we would address equity in the region.

## Converting Feedback to Strategy

To convert all this feedback into an effective strategy, we had to disaggregate the feedback—this time into ideas for what we should fund and how we should structure that funding.



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