

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

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The Power of Feedback

(https://ssir.org/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.



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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.

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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.

(https://ssir.org/images/blog/FredBlackwell_ListeningSession-592x333-I.jpg)



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 (<http://www.policylink.org/node/51321>). 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.

(https://ssir.org/images/blog/SanFrancisco_ListeningSession-592x271-I.jpg)



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.

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their stronghold in the Bay Area. So, within our equity agenda we have a strong focus on housing that cuts across the People, Place, and Power pathways.

Our grantees also felt that changing the way we funded them could help achieve greater impact. They said our grants were too small, too restricted, and distributed over too short a time frame. Based on their feedback, we now make larger grants over multiple years and skew toward providing operating rather than programmatic support.

Two and a half years after announcing the equity agenda, it is ingrained throughout our work. And now we are overdue for another round of community listening sessions. When we launch them, we expect to garner even more ideas for creating impact than in the first round. And we expect these new learnings will lead us to correct course, to deepen our commitment where we hear of positive results, and to find new ways to advance our equity work where it's most needed based on feedback from our community.

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Fred Blackwell is CEO of [The San Francisco Foundation](#).

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