

The Council on Foundations Doesn't Need Better Marketing, It Needs a Vision

By Aaron Dorfman

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Former Congressman Steve Gunderson recently left the helm of the Council on Foundations, a philanthropic trade association whose 1,700 members give away some \$20 billion annually in grants. The Council wisely solicited comments on the kind of CEO they should be looking for, preparing a draft "Position and Candidate Description" and asking for additional commentary on this document.

Here is the feedback I submitted via the Council's website:

With the choice of a new CEO, the Council's board will demonstrate its vision for the organization's future and the future of philanthropy generally. The stakes are incredibly high.

According to the Philanthropy Awareness Initiative, only one in ten engaged Americans, themselves only 12 percent of the U.S. population, can give a single example of a foundation's impact on an issue they care about.

In recent years, philanthropy has been encouraged to "tell our story" to lawmakers and to the public in an attempt to deal with this awareness deficit. The current job description makes it clear that the Council is looking for someone with the "gravitas" to do that. But if philanthropy does not get the respect we think it deserves, perhaps it is time to start discussing the product, not just the marketing.

Philanthropy and the communities it serves have suffered too long from a lack of leadership on numerous issues. Despite advances made in other sectors, philanthropy still lags in diversity and inclusiveness, and in funding that benefits lower-income communities and communities of color. Despite prominent philanthropic forays into education reform, philanthropy still largely shies away from public policy engagement -- except when it serves its own interests.

"At a time when America is having a debate about the social contract, philanthropy is silent," said Emmett D. Carson, president of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, in the November 1, 2011 New York Times. "We are silent about the depths of the problems of homelessness, joblessness, foreclosure, hunger, and people are starting to believe that philanthropy is irrelevant to the core needs of their communities."

At the top of the list of major responsibilities for a new CEO should be: "Improves philanthropy's ability to make lasting and concrete advances in the lives of those with the least wealth, opportunity and power." We need a leader who will not only serve philanthropy but help and challenge foundations to address pressing social needs.

The Council's new CEO should offer a vision for philanthropy that goes beyond a menu of member services and protecting philanthropic privileges on Capitol Hill. The Council and its next CEO must be able to answer the question: what is the purpose of philanthropy today?

The Council will have to reach outside its comfort zone for such a leader. As I told the Chronicle of Philanthropy earlier this year, "Search firms significantly limit the kinds of candidates that boards are exposed to... They should be more courageous and more intentional about issues of diversity and experience when presenting boards with a pool of candidates."

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