

Wanted: Philanthropy CEOs Who Can Shift Out of Neutral

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Philanthropy frequently justifies its independence by invoking capacities it seldom displays. Philanthropy, we are told, is the vaunted passing gear. "Social action is usually a slow process," wrote Paul Ylvisaker, who championed the poor through his long career in government, philanthropy and the academy. "Foundations by stepping in can speed up the process, acting as 'society's passing gear.'" But where Ylvisaker saw potential for grantmakers to be catalysts and agents for change, we too often today see foundation leaders who prefer to be neutral conveners.

In 2011, dozens of prominent philanthropic CEOs left their organizations or announced their departures, including Paul Brest, Greg Chaillé, Steve Gunderson, Feather Houstoun, Gara LaMarche, Lance Lindblom, Margaret McKenna, Aryeh Neier, Gary Yates, and others. These high-profile exits have me considering what we need from CEOs of our nation's grantmaking institutions.

These times demand philanthropic leaders who can shift their organizations—and philanthropy—out of neutral. We have to be fair and honest with each other even if we disagree. But we cannot be neutral in the face of staggering inequality, decreasing opportunities, low social mobility and the steady destruction of our natural environment—especially knowing there are powerful interests that are organized and resourced to keep things that way. Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, "If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality."

Philanthropy needs leaders firmly on the side of those with the least wealth, opportunity, and power: leaders with a burning hunger for justice, humility, and, most of all, courage. If our sector gains more CEOs with these qualities, it will more likely become Ylvisaker's hoped-for passing gear.

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