

'Strategy' Is Not a Bad Word: It Is Essential Even to Grass-Roots Movements

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In philanthropy, the word “strategy” gets tossed around a lot.

To some, it's become a bad word, conjuring up images of consultants dressed in business casual who don't understand nonprofits or the issues they face, brewing up strategies depicted in PowerPoint that get approved by a foundation board and then forced down the throats of grantees.

Strategy is seen as top-down, and as far removed from the grass roots as it can be, and on the opposite end of the spectrum from where a majority of our nation's great social movements emerged.

To be sure, some of what are called “strategies” in philanthropy unfold in this way, and sadly, it is these strategies that almost inevitably fail most spectacularly.

They fail because they are concocted in blissful ignorance of the complexities of the work and the perspectives of those closest to it. As a result, they are ineffective.

But that doesn't mean we should throw out the concept. Because the fact is, strategy is absolutely essential to making a difference.

The most successful movements for change in this country have been successful precisely because they were strategic, in the best sense of the word.

When we talk about foundation strategy, we are talking about a clear hypothesis about how a philanthropy will achieve its goals, including what actions it will take and how it will distribute its grants. It sounds simple enough, but it's surprising how many foundations don't use sound strategy day to day.

Some foundations fail to develop their strategies in consultation with beneficiaries or to understand how the problems they are seeking to solve affect different communities in unique ways.

Others are too risk-averse when setting strategy, failing to get more power out of their limited dollars by investing in advocacy, community organizing, or other approaches that are likely to influence public policy.

But some do act strategically, and they do it well. And, contrary to the rap against strategy, some of the best foundation strategies have been used to foment social movements that have helped people secure basic rights.

Take the Gill Foundation's work on gay rights, for example. A decade ago, Gill defined very clear and measurable goals in advancing gay rights—such as reducing hate crimes and securing rights for domestic partners—and created strategies for achieving them.

Gill's leaders frequently revised their strategies based on new data. For example, when the passage of hate-crimes legislation did not lead to the anticipated decline in hate crimes, they focused on educating prosecutors and people in law enforcement—and then saw the kind of change they were hoping for.

Despite this, we still hear critics of strategy argue frequently and passionately that strategy and social movements don't mix.

But look back at the civil-rights movement and it's hard not to be struck by the brilliance of the strategies that led to civil-rights and voting-rights legislation.

Activists used nonviolent strategies such as lunch-counter sit-ins and the Freedom Rides to draw attention to segregation and attract a diverse array of black and white citizens to push for change. Those were deliberately chosen strategies. And they were highly effective.

So the problem isn't with strategy, it's with bad strategy.

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