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The Ben & Jerry's Foundation: Maximizing Impact Through Employee-Led Philanthropy

By Rebecca Golden

The Ben & Jerry's Foundation was established in 1985 with a gift of stock from Ben Cohen. Jerry Greenfield was appointed president of the foundation because, as he likes to tell it, he missed the first meeting when roles were decided. The two other trustees were Jeff Furman, one of the original company board members, and Naomi Tannen, a good friend of Ben and Jerry's.

The impetus for forming the foundation was the first public stock offering of the company, as the founders felt they needed to formalize the company's tendency toward generosity. The initial goals of the foundation were to fund projects that were models for social change, infused with a spirit of hopefulness and generosity, and that enhanced people's quality of life. The foundation's office was originally located in Ithaca, New York, where Jeff lived. It was figuratively and literally separate from the

company because the trustees felt the foundation should not be beholden to or responsive to the marketing needs of the company. They wanted the philanthropic energy of the foundation to be pure in its intentions.

Right away, the foundation was flooded with requests to fund all sorts of wonderful programs, many of them involving direct services to individuals. The trustees realized early on that supporting social service programs with their very small pool of funds was not going to create much in the way of social change; it was better to use their small grants to support organizations looking at the root causes of social and environmental problems.

Over the years, the trustees came to understand that the people most impacted by social problems are in the best position to determine the solutions. Therefore, the foundation began



A "thumbs up/thumbs down" vote at an employee-led committee meeting. Photo courtesy of Ben & Jerry's Foundation.

to prioritize supporting grassroots, constituent-led organizations working to address the underlying, systemic causes of societal problems.

TRANSITION TO AN EMPLOYEE-LED STRUCTURE

In 1991, the trustees invited a group of philanthropists, activists and respected community members to a retreat to gather insight on how the foundation was doing. They wanted feedback on issues such as: Was the foundation funding the right kind of organizations and programs? Should it be making a few large grants or many small grants? Should it be making multi-year grants or annual grants? Was the decision-making process fair and adequate?

The recommendation that came out of the retreat took everyone by surprise: If the foundation truly believed in the primacy of grassroots, constituent leadership, then it should walk its own talk, and become a grassroots, constituent-led organization itself. Grantmaking decisions at Ben & Jerry's Foundation should be made by Ben & Jerry's employees.

Initially, this revelation led to some hand-wringing. But eventually, the trustees enacted a multi-year effort to figure out how to make it work. The first step was to move the foundation offices first to Vermont and ultimately to the corporate headquarters. They hired some staff and an Employee Study Group was formed to survey Ben & Jerry's employees about what they would like to see the foundation become. Not surprisingly, the Employee Study Group recommendations included more employee involvement in decision-making and more giving in Vermont. At the same time, the study group reaffirmed the employees' broad support of the foundation's social justice funding priorities. The recommendations of the study group were reviewed by the foundation trustees and the corporate

board. After a substantial development and transition process, the employee-led structure was implemented in 1995. While that structure has been tweaked and augmented over the years, it largely remains intact to this day.

WHAT DOES THIS STRUCTURE LOOK LIKE?

The foundation administers several different grant programs and manages committees of about 12-15 employees for each program. Foundation staff solicits representation from each of Ben & Jerry's manufacturing and administrative sites in Vermont. Depending on the program, they meet once a month or a few times a year. Committee members must get permission from their supervisors to participate, and their work on the foundation committee is considered part of their job at Ben & Jerry's. The foundation holds comprehensive orientation trainings for new committee members every year. This orientation is key to the foundation's integrity and the success of this structure through the years.

The mission of the Ben & Jerry's Foundation is to engage Ben & Jerry's employees in philanthropy and social change work; to give back to our Vermont communities; and to support grassroots activism and community organizing for social and environmental justice around the country.

Some of the initial hand-wringing that came from the recommendation to become employee-led was over concern that the employees might not want to continue funding grassroots organizing work or that they wouldn't fully appreciate the importance of supporting social justice organizing. Ultimately, this concern was a non-issue because the foundation has such well-developed guidelines and funding priorities. Nevertheless, there is certainly a learning curve for new committee members, and that is why we ask them to commit to a three-year term and give them the opportunity to re-up for a second term. The experienced committee members offer an invaluable perspective for the new members and provide a level of continuity and institutional memory that is essential for our structure to work effectively.

HOW DOES THE PROCESS WORK?

Staff invites and vets grant proposals that then go before the committee. Committee members review proposals each month and then come together at a meeting to discuss and vote on each. They also determine the size of the grants. The recommendations from the committee are then presented to the trustees for approval. This last step is a formality as the trustees have never once denied a recommendation from the committee for a grant. In fact, Jerry refers to himself and the other trustees as "The Rubber Stamps."

CHALLENGES

While the idea of an employee-led foundation seems straightforward on paper, it has not always been easy, and the path to getting to where we are today has not been straight. We have had to figure out how to select committee members, how to retain them, how to solicit interest from other employees, how to get buy-in from supervisors and managers and most challengingly, how to ensure that

"I have never been more proud to be an employee of Ben & Jerry's."

– Nolan Titcomb
Waterbury
3rd Shift Production

"I just wanted to say 'thank you' for organizing such a wonderful trip to Chicago last week. The visits we made were incredibly meaningful and getting to know many of the committee members better was pretty special to me, too. ... So – thank you, thank you. I came home inspired and grateful."

– Leslie Arroyo
Retail Operations

"I am really glad to be on the Community Action Team – and as always, when I get out of my little box over here and think about how much good we are empowered to do on behalf of B&J I am really proud and grateful."

– Jane Earley
Central Support
Design Team

"The foundation continues to enable me to experience firsthand the many important issues we are facing in this country and world – so many people trying to make the changes necessary to enable everyone to have a better life. I am so proud to be able to be part of the foundation."

–Brenda Noyes
St. Albans
1st Shift Production

employee committee members are given enough time to be fully engaged in the process. We have met each of these goals with mixed success and have had to readjust our methods over time as both the company and the foundation have grown and evolved. Part of the challenge is that, as progressive a company as Ben & Jerry's is, it is still a for-profit company. The mission of the Ben & Jerry's Foundation is not the same as the mission of the company.

Engaging employees in our philanthropic work is a top-of-line priority for the foundation, yet there is no equivalent priority written into the mission of the for-profit company. It is the responsibility of the foundation, therefore, to expose, engage, encourage and enlighten the leadership, management and line-level staff of the company as to why it is relevant and needs support. As the company has matured and its ownership structure has changed, this task has proven essential to maintaining the integrity of the foundation's structure. It helps that two of our trustees also sit on the board of directors of the company. Going forward, we understand that this arrangement will be necessary for our continued success.

BENEFITS

The people who participate on the Ben & Jerry's Foundation grantmaking teams have consistently shared with us that their experience has been profound and

life-changing (see sidebar). These are people who might not otherwise have the opportunity to learn about and meet people working to fight border patrol abuses along the U.S.-Mexican border, or systemic wage theft in the temp industry or draconian school discipline policies in inner-city schools. It can be easy in Vermont to feel isolated, privileged or removed from many of the issues faced by folks in the rest of the nation. Many committee members have shared that their work on the foundation committee is among the most satisfying aspects of their job at Ben & Jerry's.

LESSONS AND RELEVANCE

Just as many foundations are beginning to understand the wisdom and integrity of mission-aligned investment policies, so too can grantmaking institutions consider incorporating mission-aligned decision-making into their processes and structures. Private foundations can appoint stakeholder representatives to their boards, including activists and practitioners. Trustees should be encouraged to attend site visits. And anti-racism and equity training should be required for all board members who are serious about social change grantmaking.

Based on our experience, here are the top three takeaways for corporate foundations that are considering an employee-led approach to decision-making:

- 1) Develop a corporate culture of learning. Buy-in and encouragement throughout the organization is necessary in order to ensure success. It is essential that not only corporate leadership, but also managers, supervisors and fellow employees support the work.
- 2) Develop a robust orientation and training period for new committee members. Recognize and build in the time for a learning curve and reinforce the learning throughout their tenure.
- 3) Have the humility to ask the committee members themselves what works best for them, and be willing to adjust your processes. While the Ben & Jerry's Foundation has certainly experienced challenges along the way, our commitment to making this structure work has enabled us to be willing to adjust our approach and learn from our mistakes.

Our internal decision-making structure reflects our core commitment to empowering and elevating the voices of those traditionally without power. We invite other foundations to consider how their core processes can mirror their values and help bring them closer to achieving their missions. ■

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