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National Committee for
Responsive Philanthropy

1900 L Street NW, Suite 825

Washington, DC 20036

Phone 202.387.9177

Fax 202.332.5084

E-mail: info@ncrp.org

Moving power to advance racial equity

By Hanh Le

The Weissberg Foundation is a small, family foundation based in Arlington, Virginia. It was started in 1988 by real estate developer and engaged citizen Marvin Weissberg.

We have always operated with a broad vision for social justice. In the past several years, we have worked to better articulate our mission, to advance organizations and efforts building power of those most negatively impacted by racism through funding, amplification, capacity building and collaboration. In 2018 the foundation made grants totaling \$1.4 million.

In January 2016 our trustee Nina Weissberg began participating in a 6-month learning series organized by the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers (WRAG) called “Putting Racism on the Table¹.”

This experience provided her and, through her, the foundation (including me when I came on board in May of that year) stronger foundational knowledge about structural racism, implicit bias and white privilege, and an urgency for philanthropy – including the Weissberg Foundation – to play a role in advancing racial equity.

In August 2016, we kicked off a strategic planning process. The first thing the board and staff did as part of this process was to articulate our core values, which included equity.

Over the next year, and with that lens, we did a lot of talking to each other; getting feedback from our grantee partners, declined grant applicants and peers; and looking at our grantmaking history.

Soon after we started our strategic planning process, Donald Trump won

the presidential election; this was a real kick in the tail for us.

We convened a board and staff call in the week following the election to process the “what, so what and now what” of that, and our biggest “now what” was that we needed to be bolder in developing, naming and implementing our strategy to advance equity.

Throughout the remainder of our strategic planning process, it became clear that so much of what our work was addressing was caused by inequity, in particular racial inequity.

In August 2017, we released our new strategic framework and our new Reframing <Washington> program area, both centered on advancing racial equity by supporting building power in communities of color.

Since that time, we have continued to build our knowledge, sharpen our analysis and examine our own complicity in structural racism. In late 2019, we revised the language in our strategic framework to be even bolder and more explicitly anti-racist.

POWER MOVES AS A RESOURCE

In 2018 we started using *Power Moves* as a tool to help us more effectively operationalize racial equity internally and externally.

I participated in an NCRP learning cohort of other foundations exploring how to implement *Power Moves*, and our foundation dedicated significant time through 3



Weissberg Foundation's Disrupt, Move, Voice Power program is one example of the foundation's "reparative" grantmaking prioritizing the funding of people of color-led organizations.

consecutive board meetings from November 2018 through June 2019 to examine how we build, share and wield power.

Throughout this process, we found that *Power Moves* provided:

- An **accessible framework** – building power, sharing power, wielding power – for engaging in tough conversations on race.
- A **tool for our board and staff to assess** progress, perspectives and knowledge about operationalizing racial equity, and chart a plan for making further progress.
- **Tangible benchmarks** for advancing equity.
- **Relatable, practical and inspiring stories** of how other foundations build, share and wield power toward racial equity.

We devoted each board meeting to a different dimension of power (building, sharing, wielding). In advance of each meeting, using a survey tool co-created with NCRP as part of the *Power Moves* Peer Learning Group, we anonymously surveyed board and staff on how well they thought we were doing on that aspect of power.

At the actual board meetings, we then shared and discussed results of the assessment. To bring the concepts to life, we explored how other foundations and our grantee partners move power by reading case studies about their work, or inviting them to the board meeting to share firsthand.

Outcomes of this self-assessment and learning process included a greater shared understanding among the foundation board and staff of where we were, where we wanted to be and how we could move toward engaging power more effectively for equity.

MOVING POWER IN GOVERNANCE AND OPERATIONAL PRACTICE

Before we started using *Power Moves*, but certainly more so since, we have been making some changes to advance racial equity internally:

- In terms of **board composition**, we are moving from an all-white, almost all-family board to adopting a goal of becoming 50% family member, 50% community member, and significantly more diverse (in race, gender, sexuality, life experience, etc.) in the next few years.

- We adopted an **Investment Policy Statement** to get us to 100% mission-aligned in 5 years, so we are considering racial equity in how we wield our investment decisions.
- We build meaningful engagement in **board meetings** with our increasingly diverse board and staff as active participants.
- In terms of **hiring staff**, we are transparent about salaries, eliminate unnecessary qualifications like certain educational degrees and prioritize as essential other qualifications such as relevant lived experience.
- In **managing staff**, we make the time to offer and request 2-way feedback, and we support facilitative leadership by all.
- We support ongoing group and individual **learning about race and racism** by board and staff.
- We wield our consumer power by ensuring that any **consultants and vendors** we hire, from accountants to IT service providers, practice values that align with ours.

MOVING POWER IN GRANTMAKING PRACTICE AND PROGRAMS

In terms of ensuring our programmatic activities, including our grantmaking practices, are more racially equitable, we engage in the following:

- **"Reparative" grantmaking:** Prioritizing funding people of color-led organizations, which have been and continue to be egregiously underfunded by philanthropy, that are explicitly striving to advance racial equity through advocacy, organizing, civic engagement and/or other power-building strategies. Our Equitable Justice program and Disrupt, Move, Voice Power program are the strongest examples of this.
- **"Partly-participatory" grantmaking:** Sharing grantmaking decision-making power by engaging community reviewers throughout our

proposal review process, including co-creation of our application assessment rubric; compensating them fairly; and building a pipeline to our board. (At this point, staff and board work side-by-side with community reviewers as co-creators, but if/when we move to community members leading the process, then we will feel more comfortable calling it true participatory grantmaking.)

- **Going beyond the “no” with declined grant applicants:** Inviting 2-way feedback conversations with declined grant applicants and providing acknowledgment grants to those that get to a certain stage in the grant review process to signal our appreciation for their efforts.
- **Tending to our ABCs:** Going beyond funding by ramping up our strategies around Amplification, Building capacity and Collaboration in ways that help grantee partners meet their larger vision for racial equity.

LESSONS LEARNED IN MOVING POWER

Everything we do is an opportunity to learn and to inform our next steps, so we seek out lessons that will develop us individually and institutionally at the foundation, and that will help make the philanthropic sector more equitable. Some stand out as particularly important:

Ensuring that the necessary conditions for effectively examining how we are moving power:

- Consciousness and honesty about the truth that philanthropy is historically rooted in inequitable systems, structures and dynamics, and a true belief that philanthropy can operate in a different, more equitable way.
- Commitment to advancing equity both internally and externally and for the long-haul – it needs to be an authentic and sustained effort.
- Shared agreements, strategies and language for dealing with unhealthy

power dynamics, macroaggressions and other inequitable behavior. This work is messy, and though we ultimately seek to change systems and structures, this work is deeply personal. We have to build a container for that; not necessarily a safe container but a brave one.

- Empathy for the extra burden that people of color carry in leading or being a part of this equity journey, and care and resources to support them.
- Because of the reality of foundation power dynamics, board members who can help champion the work so that it is not all staff-driven.

Carving out the time needed to move equity efforts forward:

- More time for bringing along the full board early in the process so that staff and board champions do not get too far ahead of others, which can be alienating on both sides.
- More time to accommodate for meandering conversations that might go down unexpected paths (e.g., cutting off a discussion about racial bias because we need to review our financials is a downer).

Knowing who to turn to for help:

- Engaging with peers who have been on similar journeys for shared learning, support, idea generation and collaboration.
- Bringing in external experts to lead some of the tougher conversations and processes, but being sure to vet them carefully. There are lots of consultants now that say they do racial equity consulting, but not all of them are good or right for you, and they can actually derail your process and inflict harm on those involved.

Keeping it real:

- The need to bring kindness, compassion, empathy and, sometimes, indignant rage to the process.

- Remembering, especially when you are faced with obstacles and challenges of doing racial equity work, that THAT IS THE WORK!

Moving power when we feel powerless:

- Always pushing ourselves to examine how we as individuals – in whatever roles we play – can build, share and wield our own power to move forward change.
- Reminding ourselves of Eric Liu’s 3 laws of power: 1. Power pools and concentrates; 2. Power self-justifies; and, most importantly, 3. Power is infinite ... it can be created!

WHAT’S NEXT FOR THE FOUNDATION?

When we did the *Power Moves* assessments, we found that we are moving in the right direction across all 3 dimensions of power. That said, it was clear we have the furthest to go in terms of **wielding our power**.

So, building the muscle – of both our board and staff – to push philanthropy, academia, government and business to operate and engage more equitably is a particular priority for us in the coming year.

Because racial equity is both a process and an outcome, our work needs constant, vigilant tending and nurturing – it is ongoing.

And because people’s lives, our communities, our country and our humanity are on the line, we will keep at it. ■

Hanh Le is executive director of the Weissberg Foundation. She participated in NCRP’s Power Moves Peer Learning and Advisory Group.

Notes

1. To learn more, visit <https://www.puttinggracisonthetable.org/>