Like many of us, I spend an inordinate amount of time on planes, and over time, I have come to appreciate flying as a rare sanctum for reflection. One ritual in this sphere, the pre-flight safety demonstration, ranks among my favorite: It offers preparation and instruction for the unexpected, and highlights the service and amenities that accompany the journey.

Investing in nonprofit leadership development, as others in this series have shown, is a high-leverage strategy that can further the goals of any foundation. It is not a one-off, transactional proposition but a dynamic, iterative voyage. This piece offers a “pre-flight briefing” for foundations on (or curious about) this journey.

The Levi Strauss Foundation is carrying out a five-year initiative called Pioneers in Justice in our hometown of San Francisco—a cradle of innovation in civil rights and technology. We are supporting five nonprofit leaders who are shaping the next wave of social justice work as they use the power of social media and networks to advance their missions and movements. In June, we published a case study by Heather McLeod Grant on...
the initiative’s textured results and lessons; recently she contributed a handy overview of her findings.

We have learned a tremendous amount about how to invest in leadership networks as a tool for transformative social change. Admittedly, this work can be kind of messy: It involves embracing both complexity and emergence, and doesn’t lend itself to strict, linear thinking. But when it works, it serves as a potent “super-vitamin” for amplifying impact across multiple layers of the systems we seek to transform.

Here are some tips on how to prepare for a successful journey.

1. **Expand the toolkit.**

From the outset, it was clear that bolstering these leaders and organizations to drive meaningful change would call for approaches beyond traditional grantmaking, with its tangible sets of deliverables on fixed timelines. We embraced experimentation (knowing that some of the pasta wouldn’t stick to the wall) and broadened our toolkit.

Of course, grants served as a vital starting point, both to build social media capacity and support experiments in breakthrough forms of collaboration—reaching across sector, field, and constituency, and mobilizing both trusted and “unlikely” allies. We hosted bimonthly “pioneers forums”—learning sessions that featured case studies, training, and guest speakers—knowing that amid their rigorous responsibilities, nonprofit leaders rarely have space to connect with peers, have frank discussions, and “peer around the corner” in anticipation of challenges facing the field. We supported a retreat by Rockwood Leadership Institute for three senior leaders (including one board member) from each organization.

We aimed to use all the leadership tools at our disposal—convener, organizer, relationship broker, listener, policy promoter, and knowledge disseminator. As Tessie Guillermo, CEO of ZeroDivide (a terrific partner in building the social media and communications prowess of these leaders) said, “This is part of a movement in philanthropy—a departure from traditional grantmaking toward change-making through a broader set of levers.”

2. **Broaden the time horizon.**

As Bob Haas, president emeritus of our foundation, says: “One of the most difficult lessons in philanthropy is to be patient and stay committed—especially when the going gets tough.”

When embarking on Pioneers in Justice, we recognized that to have an impact, we needed to go
slow and deep. It was new for us to focus so intensively on five organizations. We also sensed that we needed a five-year timeline to show that fundamental change is possible through leaders’ embrace of technology and networked collaboration.

Our conclusion: Long-term commitment, grounded in shared values and rigorous goal-setting, has its rewards. Commitment fosters honesty and intimacy. In turn, this fuels risk-taking and more expansive ambitions, such as these:

- Asian Americans Advancing Justice’s Asian Law Caucus is leaping into the digital space to engage Asian Americans on challenging immigration issues; it aims to debunk mythologies of the “good” and “bad” immigrant to drive broader support for reform.
- National Center for Lesbian Rights and Equal Rights Advocates forged unprecedented ties with perhaps “unlikely” allies—including the Sheriff’s Department and District Attorney’s Office—for its Let Her Work campaign, which champions formerly incarcerated women.
- Chinese for Affirmative Action is serving as a backbone for the dynamic new network Asian Americans for Civil Rights and Equality (AACRE). The network’s members include a range of progressive community organizations, and it aims to serve as an inclusive home and ballast. AACRE offers shared back-office capabilities and spawns new kinds of collaboration—for instance, between marriage equality and prisoner reentry advocates.

No doubt, leaders cannot cultivate these kinds of innovative changes overnight.

3. Bring the worlds together.

Meaningful philanthropy requires outstanding partners. At our foundation, it has proven invaluable to forge direct connections between our board members and community partners. Through site visits and board sessions, we curate conversations that bring to life the challenges of change management and the standout leadership characteristics of our partners. (The book *Forces for Good* can be a powerful touchstone for these dialogues—in fact, our staff embraces its guiding principles to help identify game-changing leaders and propel impact across our strategies.)

This helps everyone discern the long-term lifecycle of change—warts and all. Our board understands that bad policies and egregious rights violations often trigger the issues and events of our day. These threats, however, may instigate a perfect storm of change if community leaders are deft, savvy, and tenacious enough to take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves. We know that it is not possible to predict these circumstances or foster this spark of change in every instance; we embrace our role of providing patient capital and preparing our partners for these watershed moments.
For foundations, the journey to supporting nonprofit leadership may not be linear, or free of bumps and turbulence. But it comes with few risks and potentially lofty rewards—especially over the long haul. Finally, it’s not an all-or-nothing proposition: Take any of these kernels of insight and apply them to enhance your journey.

Read an expanded version of this piece, with more pre-flight tips, here.

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