

2

“You can’t participate in civil society if you are a funder. You never get more than 50% of what is going on.”

“Social change is political.”

INSIGHT

When funders wear multiple hats – as individual advocates as well as representatives of a funding organization – it can be unclear which role the funder is playing at any given time.

The power dynamic of the funder-grantee relationship is always present, even when the individuals from organizations are interacting in other contexts. If funders are also going to be active in the spaces where their grantees work, then they need to clearly communicate which role they are in, so as not to unintentionally overstep or blur the funder-grantee relationship.

“What is the end game here? Building effective organizations, or political change through supporting organizations?”

“This is [Luminate’s] moment. If they’re willing to step up, they could have huge potential in this sector.”

Insights

The confusion was exacerbated by the fact that GCE saw itself as an “operational funder” (and still does as Luminate). This can be broadly defined as a funding organization that engages in direct advocacy as well as also supporting the policy and advocacy goals of organizations in the field.

Challenges arose when members of GCE’s staff were seen to be wearing multiple hats – as individual advocates as well as representatives of a funding organization. When individual staff express support for something, people hearing it are not always able to determine if the statement of support means 1) this is interesting work that someone should be doing that aligns with GCE’s priorities, 2) this is a priority for a direct operational play by GCE, or 3) this is critical to the social-political moment in general.

Some participants voiced concerns about funders also acting as advocates, as funders naturally have a position of power in the space and have access to knowledge not available to other advocates. Others pointed out that GCE’s success depended on its staff taking the time to develop very clear opinions and stances on particular issues, which naturally leads to a more “activist” position.

THEMES

- > Funder Identity & Culture
- > Funding Approach & Process

Recommendations

When funders participate in spaces as advocates, they can run the risk of overstepping or blurring the funder-grantee relationship. To reduce this ambiguity:

- Be explicit about which role you are playing at a given time (as both a funder and advocate in the field), understand where the boundaries of that role lie, and be aware of the conflict that may crop up when switching roles. This is relevant both in private (e.g., in a conversation with a prospective grantee) and in public (e.g., when writing a white paper).