

When it's Better for Everyone, it's Better for Everyone

Gwyn Barley



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Gwyn Barley

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In 2012, Gwyn Barley took the position of Director of Programs at The Colorado Trust, a health conversion foundation striving to create health equity for all Coloradans. In 2014, her title was changed to Director of Community Partnerships and Grants to better align with the commitment to resident led place based grantmaking throughout Colorado.

From 1985 to 2012, Gwyn was on the faculty of the University of Colorado (CU) School of Medicine, taking time off to complete her Ph.D. in Social Welfare at Brandeis University in the Heller School for Advanced Studies in Social Welfare. She was a Pew Fellow in Health Policy, and graduated in 1994. She earned a Masters of Planning at the University of Southern California (1985) and a Sociology degree at the University of California at Santa Cruz (1983). Her time at CU was focused on medical student and health professionals' education and assessment, from founding and directing the Center for Advancing Professional Excellence and the Foundations of Doctoring Curriculum. Her passion was inspiring students to build authentic patient led relationships with those they care for and serve. Gwyn also spent considerable time helping launch the Department's community based participatory research partnerships with diverse and low-income residents living around the closed Stapleton Airport.

Gwyn spent her early years living on the west side of Chicago with the Ecumenical Institute. She learned to read in Head Start and sadly remembers the night the ghetto burned after Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968. By middle school, Gwyn moved to Denver, Colorado. She now lives with her husband Paul, 14 year-old daughter Zoe and yellow lab Opal in Boulder. Gwyn, Paul and Opal can be found running trails and races anywhere they can find them and taking Zoe to dance classes of all kinds. Gwyn is also a needlepointer and weaver, acting on the love of working with fibers inspired by her grandmother when she was 8 years old.



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Gwyn E. Barley, PhD

Pursuing organizational excellence may – unintentionally- pull organizations away from meaningful and sustained concerted action in community. If so, what needs to happen?

The tension between the pursuit of organizational excellence and the unpredictability of working and partnering in and with communities is real. Working in community is fundamentally about giving up one's control of the agenda, the resource allocation, exclusive decision-making, and the process. Achieving organizational excellence is all about control and trying to achieve order with seemingly complex personnel and processes often driven by consultants and experts.

All one needs to do is google “organizational excellence” to see it is alive and well in our culture and seen as a panacea for all our woes. The list of options and opportunities goes on for pages. We are desperately seeking organizational excellence to fix all our internal problems and “be the best we can be.” What is organizational excellence and when do you know you have reached it? Do you ever reach it? When googling “organizational excellence definition” one sees even more varied ideas about what it is – some even say it is difficult to define and even more difficult to achieve. Mark Webster in his blog, *So What is Organizational Excellence*, says, some words that must feature in any workable definition include “superior” and “sustainable”, and both in the context of what the organization is doing or achieving.

You ask, doing or achieving for whom? Every organization has groups of people who have an interest in it because of the effect on them, either directly or indirectly, of what the organization does. The most obvious are customers or clients, those who benefit directly from the organizations' products and services. Then there are those with a financial interest – shareholders. The list grows as we consider all those with an interest, and before long suppliers, partners, employees and even society as a whole start to feature. These ‘stakeholders’ ultimately are deciding whether an organization is excellent or not, based on their expectations of what the organization delivers for them. So, how do philanthropic organizations then go about the business of becoming excellent and at what cost?

The stakeholders of philanthropy are almost always non-profit organizations. These organizations are working on causes and concerns that align with foundations' theories of change or current strategies. Non-profits often experience funders as unaware of the various challenges their organizations face, and most do not think foundations are using their resources and knowledge to help them address their challenges (Center for Effective

Philanthropy, Nonprofit Challenges – What Foundations Can Do, 2013). Non-profits are often in the position of trying to align to what foundations think are important, not necessarily what non-profits are directly working on. This creates a disconnect for both sectors as foundations drive the agenda and non-profits, needing funds, may alter their work to be fundable. Non-profits also find themselves in a challenging relationship – one of trying to meet their mission and retain funding over time.

Some would go further to say the nonprofit sector has tamed a generation of activists. They've traded in "grand visions of social change for salaries and stationery; given up recruiting people to the cause in favor of writing grant proposals and wooing foundations; and ceded control of their movements to business executives in boardrooms." This argument—that reformers have morphed into cogs in the nonprofit industrial complex—is explained and explored in the fiery anthology *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, edited by the INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence collective (South End, 2007). Patty Gabow, MD, past CEO of Denver Health, once said in a presentation that the measure of her success would be the day she closed the doors of Denver Health, because the public safety net health system would have no reason to exist – the problem it was created to address had been solved. That was her measure of achieving the mission and defined her idea of organizational excellence.

In this era, philanthropy finds itself separated from the people it was created to serve. Foundations continue to contribute greatly to the creation of, the middleman of our efforts, the non-profit sector. We do this in the name of achieving organizational excellence in grant making – building management structures, complex theories of change, feeding a consultant industry to help keep us on track and accountable, attending elaborate professional development opportunities within our organizations and across the philanthropic sector. We cannot get enough advice, consultation and direction on how to do our work, how to be organizationally excellent, how to minimize risk taking, how to manage grantees, and how to be fiscal stewards of the money we are responsible for allocating. Even our grant making staff are most typically called program officers; a title that suggest control.

Philanthropy is long overdue for meaningful and sustained concerted action in community. Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "When it's better for everyone, it's better for everyone." To engage the concept of everyone, we must stand amongst everyone in our work. We must authentically partner with communities and get the resources directly to communities in order for them to develop their road maps of change, their understanding of their assets, challenges and solutions. Residents need to determine whom their partners will be to become the great community they aspire to become. They need to figure out how to sustain what is working and stop what is not.

A fundamental flaw of using non-profits as the proxy to represent community is that they most commonly limit or focus their mission on a specific cause or approach or population. While there are some non-profits that are place-based and there are community based foundations, they are the minority and often smaller and less able to make large impact. It is disingenuous to try to carve up communities' assets, opportunities and problems by cause or population. Communities must be kept whole and intact to ultimately serve and solve their problems. As long as we excuse the entitled, the powerful, the wealthy of a community and only support the underserved, the disenfranchised, the people of color, we will not be a part of the making of great communities that believe fundamentally in making their home and places better for all. As Maya Angelou said – “it is impossible to struggle for civil rights, equal rights for blacks, without including whites. Because equal rights, fair play, justice, are all like the air: we all have it, or none of us has it.”

It will take a radical shift in the practices of philanthropy to approach the work of concerted action in and with community to get to a greater good for all. No amount of organizational excellence will get philanthropy there. In fact, foundations need to question the way it has been and embrace change and innovation. Philanthropy needs to try new approaches to their work. The intractable problems remain and we keep trying the same solutions with the same partners.

What can we do as philanthropists to embrace sustained concerted action in community that drives our grant making? Here are some radical proposals:

1. Build a new staff for the new way of working. The centrally located program officer model will not support community and resident driven efforts. Embed staff in communities and draw upon social justice and community facilitation skills, not grant making skills.
2. Create a platform that allows for communities to engage and lead the work. Stay true to letting residents drive the work.
3. Set the Theory of Change aside as the community needs to create that for themselves in the context of their place and lived experiences.
4. Give the funds to the community to engage the partners they need to achieve their goals.
5. Stay in the work for at least a decade.
6. Buy local and find and invest in local talent and leadership.
7. Start with data and add in empathy. Data tells you what is happening, but not why it is happening. Empathy is the root of every great breakthrough. I was reminded of

a mantra I say to myself often – that is to really know someone is to know his or her pain.

8. Listen to what is being said and done, but also to what people are thinking and feeling. Get to the human stories to really understand and make the work meaningful.
9. Get to know the work-arounds in communities as they are screaming for something to happen differently and better
10. Look for analogous inspiration by looking in new places to draw inspiration for new solutions
11. Map the journey. What is a day in the life like of the people that we are trying to empower and enable? When we know that, we think differently about the problems and solutions and we also empathize.
12. Watch for the invisible no's. The biggest enemies of innovation are fear, resistance and the Devil's advocate.
13. Put people in the middle first, not our agenda, but their agenda.

Apple collectively says - "Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do."

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These *Conversations*—and our client work in planning, strategy, philanthropy, and coaching—are all designed to strengthen adaptive organizations for inevitable change and greater impact.



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