



Are You a New Philanthropy CEO? Don't Make These Five Mistakes

I've worked with many new foundation CEOs, some of whom are not only new to their role, but new to philanthropy. If you find yourself in this position, here are 5 mistakes you should avoid:

1. Assuming you don't need to learn about philanthropy because you were hired for being "an outsider."

There is a trend in philanthropy to pooh-pooh philanthropy: a belief that philanthropy is too insular, which isn't entirely untrue. Every field needs to bring in fresh thinking and new ideas, and one way to accomplish that is to hire from outside. But that doesn't mean that the field is damaged. Giving money away is not easy. Recognize that you are standing on the shoulders of seasoned leaders with vast experience in grantmaking. Find the strengths in your foundation, your team, your funding collaborative, and your grantmaking strategies so that you know what to preserve and what to change. There is much to be learned from the experiences, best practices, and mistakes of others.

2. Not reaching out to colleagues. A few years ago I had lunch with a foundation CEO client and discussed my new project with another foundation in the same city whose CEO had recently been hired from the nonprofit sector. "Funny," my client said. "This is his first philanthropy job. He's been there four months, but he hasn't reached out to me even though our foundations are working on similar issues. In fact, I've heard the same concern from other funders. They are a major player in this community—why wouldn't he introduce himself to the other big foundations?" If you are new to the field, identify the top ten foundations in your community, the top ten in your program areas (e.g., if you fund regionally or internationally), and other key funding partners. Make a point to contact those CEOs, take them to lunch, schedule a phone conversation, or set a time to talk at a meeting you both will be attending. These colleagues can be invaluable resources to you to help orient you to your new role and to philanthropy. They might be willing to provide insight into your foundation, identify opportunities, introduce you to other colleagues, and partner with you. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

3. Insulting your colleagues. One new CEO, during a conference call with seasoned foundation leaders in his community, made a comment that philanthropy needs to change to finally have some impact. One of these foundations has been making grants for more than 100 years, and the other for more than 60. Their CEOs have been in their jobs for well over a decade each. I'm guessing that they each have achieved some impact! While there is always room for improvement, running out the gate by insulting your colleagues is not the best way to start. Instead, take the time to research your colleague foundations' strengths and accomplishments and identify ways that, collectively, you can all make improvements.

4. Not recognizing that you have entered a new industry full of connections and networks. You don't know what you don't know. So recognize that and act accordingly. A consultant colleague was introduced to a new CEO by his vice president, and after a wonderful conversation they agreed the consultant should submit a proposal to help with a project of strategic importance to the foundation. She submitted it, and waited for a response. And waited. Despite multiple phone calls, voice messages, and emails over a period of two months, she never heard from him. What this person failed to appreciate is that she was highly connected and well respected in that community and personally knew several of his staff, some board members, and many of his colleagues. Treating her poorly reflected badly on him. He walked into a new field without appreciating the existing networks and interconnectivity within it. He didn't have to hire her, but rather than leveraging existing networks, he ignored them.



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5. Refusing help. Taking a new position is risky, and I am sure you are eager to prove yourself. There are a tremendous number of resources that can help you, if you are willing to put your ego aside and accept help. This could involve executive coaching, seeking advice from colleagues, finding more seasoned philanthropy CEOs who can serve as mentors, hiring consultants to support your initial goals (e.g., to review the impact of current funding strategies or help with planning), or taking advantage of the many learning opportunities in the field. For example, look into the following resources that best meet your particular needs:

- LearnPhilanthropy provides a wealth of free resources to accelerate learning among newcomers to philanthropy.
- The Council on Foundations offers resources for CEO leadership development and foundation management.
- If you are running a family foundation, the National Center on Family Philanthropy offers the CEO Initiative.
- CEOs of small foundations can participate in Exponent Philanthropy's Master Juggler Executive Institute.
- The National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers provides a free online directory of philanthropy consultants and advisors.
- New leaders who are under age forty might consider joining Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy.
- If you are running a community foundation, you can attend the Community Foundation Fundamentals course sponsored by the Council on Foundations.
- Your local regional association of grantmakers might offer programming and support specifically for foundation CEOs or those new to philanthropy. For example, Northern California Grantmakers offers the New Grantmakers Institute.

The bottom line: You bring new strengths to your foundation and to a field that has a history of significant impact. And you also have room to learn, grow, and improve, just as your foundation and the entire philanthropic sector have opportunities to strengthen and improve. If you take the time to learn about your new world, and your role in it, you will be positioned for tremendous success.

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