

# the Change Agent project

GRANTMAKER PRACTICES THAT IMPROVE NONPROFIT RESULTS

## **Join us in finding new ways to improve nonprofit performance.**

Grantmakers can only succeed when the nonprofits they support achieve meaningful results. So it is in every grantmaker's best interest to improve the context in which grantees do their work. Today, across philanthropy, pioneering grantmakers have taken these ideas to heart and found new ways to break down the barriers standing in the way of nonprofit success. They're reshaping grantmaking practices, through changes as simple as providing more prompt response to grantee queries and as major as new funding strategies. Dissatisfied with the status quo, determined to change the way philanthropy does business, these change agents are inventing ways to revolutionize grantmaking practice.

## **What is GEO's Change Agent Project?**

The goal of the Change Agent Project is to catalyze significant, measurable change in the field of philanthropy by informing, motivating and equipping philanthropy's change agents. The Change Agent Project started by identifying the most promising change opportunities, specifically those changes grantmakers have the power to make that will contribute to nonprofit results. Next we will work to catalyze collaboration among grantmakers and grantees so together they can create change. Then we will take what we've learned to find ways to spread their innovations.

## **What approach are you using for this Project?**

A central tenet of many approaches to collective problem solving is that the community must define the problem and identify the solutions in order for change to effectively take hold. This is a central theme to Jerry Sternin's "positive deviance" approach. Jerry says the mantra of positive deviance is "don't do anything about me, without me."

GEO's Change Agent Project applies this principle to philanthropy. We are engaging grantmakers and grantees to co-design a process for change that will result in more effective grantmaker support of nonprofit results. It's our hope that the grantmakers who participate in this project will recognize the potential applications in their programmatic work. We are starting in a couple local communities because progress often begins at the local level. Once we have made some headway in the local communities we will look for opportunities to expand our work more broadly.

## **Who is a Change Agent?**

GEO uses the term *change agent* to describe two distinct groups:

- those grantmakers who have found success using uncommon approaches to common problems and
- those grantmakers who recognize that philanthropy can be more effective and are willing to lead change to make it happen

The change agents we have identified so far understand that change must originate from within the community and have found ways to incorporate grantees input and expertise in their work. From surveys of nonprofit leaders, and interviews and focus groups with grantmakers and grantees, we have found that grantmakers who include grantees in their work have developed better relationships with their grantees, and this has led to grantmaker support that better contributes to nonprofit results.

### **How did the Project begin?**

The Change Agent project began by gathering input from grantmakers and nonprofits. We have conducted about 30 interviews and held 9 focus groups across the country and have asked participants two questions: Where can changed practice make the greatest difference? Who in philanthropy is leading change?

As a conversation starter, we created a list of 12 grantmaker-imposed barriers to nonprofit success. This list was created based on a literature review and vetted with thousands of grantmakers and nonprofits through a survey, interviews and the focus groups. The barriers on the list are things we already know about — a couple examples are providing short-term grants for long-term work, unclear communications, and rigid and onerous application and reporting requirements. Focus group participants and interviewees have identified the barriers that have the biggest impact, examined the root causes behind the barriers, and identified grantmakers who have had success overcoming some of the barriers.

### **What have you learned so far?**

We've learned that there is much agreement between grantmakers and nonprofits as to which barriers have the greatest impact on grantee results. Focus group participants and interviews prioritized the following barriers:

1. Lack of funding for infrastructure and planning
2. Providing short-term grants for long-term work
3. Lack of a productive and supportive working relationship between grantmakers and nonprofits

Across the country we heard repeatedly that the power differential between foundations and nonprofits leads to the lack of a productive and supportive relationship, which is a root cause behind many of the other barriers we've been discussing. In short, if you can mitigate the power differential, a lot of the other barriers will be overcome as a result. We believe a key way to mitigate this power differential is for grantmakers to seek out the grantee perspective when setting their own agenda and determining practices. This can be accomplished through changes as significant as expanding the board and staff to better reflect the community served or as simple as seeking grantee feedback on a new foundation policy or strategy before the board adopts it.

### **What is the theory of change for the Project?**

Our theory of change is that by creating opportunities for grantmakers and nonprofits to come together to solve common problems, GEO can help catalyze changes in grantmaking relationships and practices that will better support nonprofit results.

### **What makes this work different from other efforts to change practice?**

Our approach is different from other efforts to create change in philanthropy because it starts from the bottom up. We are starting with those who want to create change and giving them the opportunities and tools they need to do so.

### **What evidence do you have that this approach will work?**

From our conversations with hundreds of grantmakers and nonprofit leaders, we already have evidence that this approach is working. We have collected stories of change agents from a variety of grantmaking organizations who have found ways of working with grantees to better support their results. GEO's role is to learn from these change agents, find ways to spread their innovations and provide other grantmakers with opportunities to become change agents in their own work.

### **How can I get involved?**

Contact Lori Bartczak, GEO's manager of special projects at [Bartczak@geofunders.org](mailto:Bartczak@geofunders.org) or 202.370.6145 to share your stories of Change Agents in philanthropy or your questions or thoughts on the project. To learn more, visit [www.geofunders.org](http://www.geofunders.org).