

PROVIDING CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

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Foundations frequently recommend technical assistance to grantees – sometimes as a condition for funding. Typically, the technical assistance is designed to improve the internal operations of emerging philanthropic organizations – many of which are organizations that were founded by, managed by or serve people of color. For African American philanthropic organizations, getting technical assistance often involves help with financial management, strategic planning, project management and developing or clarifying operational processes, such as staff roles and responsibilities.

Getting the right kind of technical assistance can consolidate, refine, synergize and extend knowledge. The wrong kind can do just the opposite. Much of the technical assistance made available to African American organizations is designed to make their information and processes more intelligible to institutions in the dominant culture, such as banks, government agencies and foundations. Most of these institutions arose from Western European and European American cultures and are reflective of those values. They are primarily concerned with breaking activities into discrete units of value, as they define them, and tracking them in a consistent way to reveal costs and benefits within that context.

Many African American organizations have processes that reflect African cultural antecedents as well as European ones; we call these processes Afro-Centric. The African antecedents are more concerned with highly nuanced qualities of relationship between the individual, the group and the common good. Flexibility, continuity, creativity and spontaneity, individual recognition, ritual and the interplay between individual and group expression are also important. So is joy.

These two very different processes are supported by different types of infrastructure – each with its own costs. The infrastructure that supports European American processes is part of the formal market economy, recognized by foundations, and factored into overhead. Its activities are calibrated into units of value such as paid staff time, supplies and materials, technical support and mileage costs for meetings and conferences.

The infrastructure that supports Afro-Centric processes is part of the non-market economy, and is generally not recognized by foundations. Rather than being supported by funded project budgets, its costs are absorbed by the Afro-Centric organization itself. For example, Afro-Centric infrastructure must express and accommodate *connectedness* in a variety of ways. Among its constituents, Afro-Centric organizations have to respond to personal crises, such as illnesses and death; community issues, such as plant closings, education and environmental issues; individual and group celebrations, such as weddings, births, graduations and various home comings; community achievements and advocacy, many of which may not be directly related to the organizational goals. They must also graciously respond to unexpected visits and invitations.

The leadership and staff of most effective African American organizations engage in these activities in addition to their time as paid employees, because they are an essential part of the Afro-Centric infrastructure. They also are part of the non-market economy. Most successful Afro-Centric organizations must maintain both types of infrastructures—market and non-market. As one might expect, the cost of doing so is high: burn-out, fatigue and the stress of meeting competing and sometimes contradictory requirements without adequate and appropriate technical assistance.

Within the U.S., it is seldom acknowledged that technical assistance comes with a cultural viewpoint embodying certain values, and that it assumes a particular cost structure. However, in the international arena, it is broadly accepted that congruence between technical assistance and the cultural values of people receiving it is important to achieving sustainability and the desired impact. As the U.S. becomes more diverse and globally interconnected, reconciling these two approaches becomes increasingly critical.

The most appropriate technical assistance and learning experiences recognize the distinctions between African and European antecedents and build upon them both.

Examples

Next Generation of African American Philanthropists (NGAAP), a giving circle in Raleigh/Durham, North Carolina was formed by **Hindsight Consulting**. The NGAAP circle consists of 10 active members – people who have agreed to donate a certain amount of money for a charitable purpose.

NGAAP members are typically raising families, starting businesses and establishing careers. They are all part of the African Diaspora – primarily African American, with some members from Africa and the Caribbean. The founding members of the circle are close friends. There are two important factors in attracting members and keeping them involved: ties of friendship, and a strong desire to connect with their own cultural traditions. According to Daryl Lester, the coordinator and principle organizer:

[There is a] burning desire to get back to our roots ... of wanting to connect our children to values of the past. Like with mutual aid societies. We need to get back to that ... to reclaim the extended family. People have a huge sense of urgency. They are tired of materialism. People come for the connectedness with each other – not just for change in community.

NGAAP emphasizes giving time and talent as well as an annual financial contribution. The circle is not incorporated and has no plans to do so. In fact, Lester, the principle organizer, does not view himself as an executive director of an organization, but rather as a consultant, guide, leader and facilitator.

If technical assistance were offered to Hindsight Consulting and NGAAP following European American cultural modalities exclusively, it would most likely focus on expanding the role of Hindsight, hiring staff, replicating the process to form multiple circles, reaching a targeted dollar amount in circle contributions and perhaps consolidating some of the funds to form a larger one. While such a path is effective for increasing and tracking units of value, however, it deviates from some of the core values of connection, friendship and culture that drive the circle.

A more appropriate form of technical assistance may be achieved by introducing the circle to *osusu*. Among the Igbo in Nigeria, *osusu* is a type of informally organized saving/giving circle. It is found by other names in many parts of Africa, the Caribbean and the African diaspora. In Trinidad, it is known as *susu*. Members contribute a certain amount of money monthly to the circle. The circle can contribute the money to a particular cause (similar to mutual aid societies) or each month it can give all of the money contributed that month to one of its members. This process continues until all members have received the proceeds from one month. It is flexible and effective, with little bureaucracy involved. Some circles function just within an extended family. Others are more broadly based.

Someone skilled in organizing *osusu* could offer valuable technical assistance to NGAAP and a different and more appropriate model for growth and development. Perhaps NGAAP would find useful elements in both European American and African models as it develops and refines its process to resonate with the desires and cultural values of its members.

Other examples include the **Black Belt Community Foundation (BBCF)**, in Selma, Alabama, whose executive director Felicia Jones says, “Our communities are our endowment.” Appropriate technical assistance to BBCF may come from examining community philanthropic models in southern Africa that resonate strongly with BBCF’s approach and orientation. Both are operating in a post-apartheid culture that has a legacy of race-based inequities in law and social practices.

Faith Partnerships, Inc., a philanthropic organization lead by Dianne Wilson based in Raleigh, North Carolina, is bringing together African American ministers across denominations as donors. With technical assistance from Faith Partnerships, they are *collectively* figuring out how to transform society to be more equitable, interface in mutually beneficial ways with both philanthropic and financial institutions in the dominant culture, and work with each other across denominations. This work, at its core, is very much about building authentic relationships in a spiritual context for the benefit of community. Demonstrating an almost seamless interface between faith, philanthropy and social justice, they exemplify the unique role that the church has played in African American communities for centuries.

Technical assistance designed for mainstream philanthropic institutions may not work well for African American churches engaged in such activities. For example, most foundations do not consider it important to align their investments with their mission. In the larger culture, a foundation can receive high marks for sound philanthropic practices even when its investments support ventures that contribute to the problems its grantmaking is trying to solve. With many African American churches, however, it is important to “walk the talk.” Philanthropy and social justice are closely aligned as expressions of faith.

Why is this important to effective grantmaking?

- Acknowledging the need for appropriate technical assistance implies the need for a different set of skills and the existence of significantly different cost structures. One size does not fit all, and formulae for determining overhead and evaluating cost/benefits may have to be reconsidered. For example, it will be important to determine both the value and the real cost in time, energy and skills to create a seamless interface between philanthropy and social justice.
- Appropriate technical assistance can leverage substantially more time, talent and treasure in the communities that receive it. It builds upon existing resources, affirms accumulated wisdom, supports the development of new knowledge and can facilitate non-exploitative opportunities for European American cultures to learn from other cultures.
- Appropriate technical assistance supports using an asset-based lens. Rather than viewing differences as deficits that must be corrected, they can be explored as opportunities for learning. And philanthropy, as a field, can move toward developing systems that work for everybody.

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