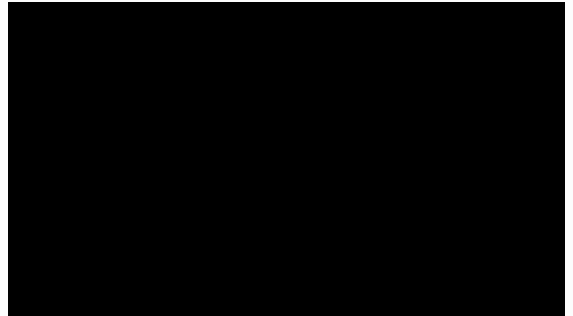


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Philanthropy Works When We Listen -- To Those We Aim To Serve



Kerry A. Dolan Forbes Staff

f *Guest post by Don Howard*

🐦 Philanthropy is in an era of renewed scrutiny, with its greater focus on results. You don't have to look far to find [books](#) and [commentary](#) taking philanthropy to task.

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And, notably, virtually no one (outside of our field) is standing up in our defense. That's because philanthropists have largely failed to demonstrate that we can allocate the dollars under our stewardship in ways that lead to clear improvements in people's lives. Too often our efforts are disconnected from real people—oriented instead toward hard-to-fathom systems or abstract and seemingly insoluble social problems.



Don Howard, CEO of The James Irvine Foundation ED KASHI

Put simply, philanthropists often fail because they fail to listen. They may listen to one another, to academics and pundits, or their guts, but they usually don't invest in meaningful listening to the grantees they support and, importantly, the people they aim to serve.

Some will argue that “people-oriented” philanthropy is too limiting because it ignores systems change or pushes us to work on problems with easy solutions. I disagree.

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Many systems *do* need to change to reduce chronic inequity and other barriers to health and opportunity. But for each system we seek to change, there are people in that system now—people with more wisdom and answers than philanthropy has or gives people credit for.

who need, rely on, or struggle with those systems today? For each long-term bet we make to address a difficult social problem, there are people in jeopardy now. What better proof point could there be than a successful pilot benefiting people today built on what they know they need?

We must do better. If not, the public policies that provide many of us in philanthropy with the uniquely American opportunity as private actors to distribute public funds should change.

We can do better by putting people at the center of our work. Here's how:

1. Determine who you seek to benefit with your philanthropy. Reach out, connect, and talk to them. Listen to have your heart and mind changed.
2. Commit to specific people-focused goals for your grantmaking. Develop, measure, and adjust your grantmaking with the input of the people you seek to benefit. Longer-term goals for changes in delivery systems and private and public policies should build off these near-term successes.
3. Share your results—the good and the bad—with the people you seek to benefit.

At Irvine, we are focused on ensuring every low-wage worker in California has the power to advance economically. We recently committed \$200 million in funding for two six-year initiatives designed with both near-term people goals and long-term systems and policy goals.

community and to our board — that this \$200 million will enable our grantees to get 25,000 more low-wage workers into family-sustaining careers and to return \$250 million a year in wages that low-income workers earn but are not paid in California.

These people-oriented goals are stepping stones, in our strategic approach, to permanent changes in systems and policies to benefit future generations.

“People-oriented philanthropy” isn’t new. But it has faded as we convinced ourselves of the need for “strategic philanthropy.” By strategic philanthropy I mean expert-driven philanthropy that incorporates social science theory to solve societal problems, usually to change systems or policies. Listening, as a result, has suffered.

But we’re encouraged by the growing community of funders now committed to listening. For example, the [Fund for Shared Insight](#) is a funder collaborative enhancing the capacity of nonprofits to hear what people in the community need, and, as a result, improve the impact of grants. That and other promising examples are getting daylight as part of the [Power of Feedback](#) campaign.

This listening can’t come quick enough as calls for philanthropic accountability grow louder. As they should.

Don Howard is President and Chief Executive Officer of The James Irvine Foundation. He led the Foundation’s recent transition to a focus on creating a California where all low-income workers have the power to advance

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