Philanthropy & Funding

A Trust-Based Model for Indigenous Grantmaking

Showing up for reconciliation by building community and broadening our mandate as funders

By Gena Rotstein | Aug. 5, 2024

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Trust-based philanthropy seeks to address historical and ongoing power imbalances by repositioning funders and grantees as collaborative partners, operating on equal footing. By recognizing that the organizations that foundations fund are best positioned to inform the solution, a trust-based approach proceeds by presuming that maximum impact is created when the organizations doing the work are fully empowered and when operational and funding barriers are removed. As a more just and equitable way for funders to engage with marginalized and underserved communities, a trust-based approach allows organizations to take more risks and test theories, services, and models; a foundation that backs its grantees with support and guidance allows them to fail forward.

This is all well understood. However, translating the *principles* of trust-based philanthropy into actual practice will look different for every organization, and an important part of doing so will be deep self-reflection on how a funder's values impact their culture, structures, grantmaking practices, and leadership style. Foundations such as the Hill-Snowdon Foundation and the T. Rowe Price Foundation have recently opened up about their process of incorporating trust-based principles into their frameworks to better serve their aims of promoting racial justice and corporate social responsibility, respectively.

In response to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Silver Gummy Foundation—a Canadian private family foundation devoted to reducing gender-based violence through education—recently set out to expand our funding mandate by creating a funding category for Indigenous organizations. As we've done so, we've learned a few key lessons:

1. Focus on relationships first, and programs and solutions second.

2. How we show up as a foundation matters: We must be willing to relinquish control over certain types of decision-making and invite feedback on our approach.

3. It takes time to build trust and the relationships upon which trust-based grantmaking is founded.

When we set out to dedicate a funding stream specifically to Indigenous organizations, we quickly ran up against the limits of our network. Our initial round of outreach, which offered funding to a list of organizations we had compiled, yielded no responses. Our first step was to look inward: At the time, none of our trustees were Indigenous. Seeking to understand how to better engage with Indigenous organizations and communities, we created a position for an Indigenous trustee, Peyasu Wuttunee, to better ensure Indigenous representation at the board level.

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This was a start. However, as we moved forward, we also realized that the definition of an "Indigenous organization" is not straightforward. What makes an organization "Indigenous"? Is it the population it serves? Is it the identity of its leadership, its governance structure, or the strength of its connections to communities and culture? And when it came to our grant evaluation process, who was in a position to answer those questions?

Silver Gummy's existing grantee network was, at the time, an organic byproduct of the relationships between different groups and their work. We accept unsolicited applications, but by actively engaging current grantees in referring and evaluating the proposals of future grantees, our process facilitates a more systemic view of the problem we are trying to solve, as well as a productive collaboration between groups working on the problem. Ideally, it steers us away from a "funding tunnel vision" in favor of a more holistic and impactful approach, benefiting both the receiving organization and the wider network in which they are situated.

In this case, however, seeking to engage with a wider range of communities for this new funding stream made us conscious of the limits of our existing networks. It helped us realize that we had to start by building *new* relationships, rather than assuming our current programming and solutions framework would be immediately transferable.

Having Peyasu as a trustee was an important first step. He introduced us to an Indigenous philanthropy and community development advisor, David Turner, who helped us develop a grantmaking strategy and terms of reference for the grant program's operation. David reached out to his network and, over several months, identified "Knowledge Keepers," "Elders," and community leaders with deep knowledge of grantmaking, soliciting, and proposal development in the funding area (gender-based violence and the impact of colonization on Indigenous family systems).

Engaging David as a community liaison was another important aspect of building relationships with new potential grantees. As David helped us understand, many Indigenous organizations have historically tended to look to government or large institutions for grant funding. "It took a while for the groups that I recruited to be aware of and appreciate what Silver Gummy wanted to do," he told us, "because most Indigenous community members haven't been approached by private family foundations to get access to funding. Typically, a private family foundation hasn't necessarily been the go-to for Indigenous communities." As a result, the connections that happen are often fleeting or unique to a foundation.

A New Working Model

The contacts that David helped us make now form what we call our "Knowledge Keepers Circle," which collectively leads the decision-making regarding Indigenous program applications. Once the Knowledge Keepers have made their recommendations, the trustees ensure that the organizations meet the legal criteria for funding and deploy funding within the quarter. The process builds space for dialogue and critique: Following the pilot round of funding, the trustees solicited feedback from the initial grantees, asking them to share their thoughts on the process, program design, reporting, and knowledge-sharing experience. For example, while we initially envisioned the Indigenous Grant as an annual opportunity, after hearing that the application deadline was creating unnecessary barriers, we adjusted the program to accept proposals on a rolling basis. This also aligned with the general funding stream of the foundation, which was year-round.

This structure and process have allowed the Silver Gummy leadership to relinquish control of the decision-making process to those better poised to understand the full context of the work and its

meanings within the communities we aim to serve. Knowing how to engage with each community requires this approach; "There's no such thing as a Pan-Indigenous approach to this," as Peyasu puts it. "It really depends on the contacts, the leads, the Elders, the Knowledge Keepers; but also the people on the ground." The Knowledge Keepers have played crucial roles in introducing new potential grantees to the Silver Gummy network, enriching the ecosystem of organizations that are addressing the problem of gender-based violence and its relationship to the ongoing impacts of colonization on Indigenous family systems and communities.

This process continues. We know that we have more work to do in terms of expanding this network beyond existing relationships and word of mouth, as well as broadening the types of organizations we serve. Our current grantees mostly operate at the frontline and community level, but there are plenty of Indigenous academic institutions we have not yet reached who are also making an impact. We also have to be conscious of our perceptions of how gender identities are interpreted in Indigenous communities. For example, when it comes to individuals who identify as Two-Spirit, "the idea that culturally, Elders or communities held gender-fluid people in high esteem, really depends on which community you are talking about," as Peyasu explained; "It's kind of a romantic notion in popular culture, like the dreamcatcher or the Medicine Wheel. There are some commonalities amongst groups and tribes, but there's no universal agreement on where these things fit, and where these issues fit in in the traditional sense." As such, we've learned not to assume that we know how the problem of gender-based violence will present or be understood in a certain community; instead, we focus on nurturing relationships within the community that allow for open dialogue and storytelling.

Broadening the Mandate

As funders, working on a trust-based model calls for us to view the problem we are trying to solve through a wider lens than just something for which we can write a check. When working with Indigenous communities, for example, it means engaging with the legacy and ongoing impacts of colonization as it affects the problems we are trying to address. In our case, being a private foundation means that we can engage in ways that governmental or other types of organizations might not be willing, or able, to commit to. In the process of developing our new grantmaking strategy, therefore, the Knowledge Keepers Circle guided our trustees through the calls to action in the Canada Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, determining which ones would be most suitable to address.

The Knowledge Keepers also educated us on some differences between Eurocentric models of grantmaking and Indigenous approaches to philanthropy. For a start, the concept of philanthropy or charity is not inherently part of North American Indigenous culture. Before colonization, all resources

would have been shared equally amongst a community; as such, philanthropy is predicated on a "have and have not" model that is not part of the orienting story of Indigenous communities. Settlers brought with them the concept of tithing from the church, and in the 1600s, tax legislation to encourage the redistribution of wealth (and communities came to require philanthropy to support their needs, in the form of government and corporate grants, as treaties were broken and Nations were pushed away from their traditional lands and resources).

In a Eurocentric grantmaking model, the power resides in the hands of the funder, and an organization must justify why they are worthy of the funder's capital. This is not the case with Indigenous grantmaking, where a funder must demonstrate that they are doing more than just handing over money. The transaction is a symbol of the funder's integration into the community (on reserve) or organization (off reserve).

For the Silver Gummy Foundation, before we could even get an organization to express what they wanted funding for, we had to meet them where they are. The leadership teams of the organizations we supported off-reserve, and the leaders of community initiatives on-reserve, met with Silver Gummy leadership several times before they felt secure in inviting the foundation into their community. Effective grantmaking with Indigenous organizations shifts this relationship. Whether on-reserve or off, the organization *invites the funder in.* Grants are then finalized through ceremony as a binding act of agreement, in addition to signing a contract.

As Indigenous language is grounded in oral traditions, as opposed to written traditions, we are also adding a new grantmaking process for all applicants (Indigenous or not). Starting in 2025, we are exploring how best to facilitate video submissions as an alternative to our current process of written submissions for all grant applicants.

The ongoing project of establishing trust is just as important as the philanthropic work itself. Previously, we've tended to this work through initiatives like hosting an annual grantee roundtable, where we cover the cost of travel to bring grantees together for knowledge sharing, professional development, and feedback. But we have also come to understand that we need to show up in ways that honor each of the communities with whom we want to engage. So far, this includes invitations such as gathering at a powwow hosted by the Ermineskin Cree Nation and holding a meeting on Tsuut'ina Nation land.

How We Show Up

As funders, we need to expand the expectations of how we show up for grantees, communities, and people we aim to partner with. We need to have genuine and specific intentions if we are to do meaningful work and build relationships with Indigenous communities. This type of work cannot be rushed. It has taken us nearly four years to lay the foundation for where we are now, in our second year of offering an Indigenous Grant. For us, there are some cultural protocols we know we have yet to fulfill, such as presenting an offering to the Knowledge Keepers and doing a sweat lodge ceremony.

In addition to cultural learnings, there are the administrative and logistical growing pains that any organization must face in formalizing a process and terms of reference for a new grant program, such as clarifying roles and expectations. But as long as we are active in reflecting on and learning from our mistakes, we can take them as further opportunities to grow and develop the relationships that ultimately serve the work our grantees are doing in their communities.

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