

Nathan Cummings Foundation Strategic Planning

Reflections on the Launch

November 19, 2012



Reflections on the Launch of the NCF Strategic Planning Process

We gathered in New York on November 11, 2012, in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, to begin the process of setting a course for the Foundation's next decade. The process is deliberate: it takes a step back from the day-to-day to help us gain a wider view of what's possible; it invites in funding partners with shared values, significant resources and a common interest in maximizing the impact of our philanthropy; and it engages NCF grant partners to give us access to valuable perspectives and help guide us to the best results.

Robert Gass helped us envision the world we want to help create. He urged us to be both humble *and bold* and to think beyond defended positions to shared interests. Roger Pielke introduced us to a set of tools that will allow us to draw a map together, to identify forks in the road, to get clearer about the choices we can make, and ultimately, to discern why some alternatives are more likely to get us to where we want to go.

In keeping with Robert's admonition about humility, Roger noted the imperfection of map-making even as we started to experience its utility.

NCF as Map-Maker

"Essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful."

George E.P. Box

Roger began with a line on a slide. By the time he'd placed six lines on the page (and a green rectangle) we recognized Manhattan, and could see that this inaccurate, simplified depiction of reality could be useful. The lines we began to draw for ourselves, between values agreement and disagreement, and between certainty and uncertainty -- about what it would take to address any particular societal problem -- began to reveal a simple map with some utility for us as decision-makers.

We could see that there are choices to be made – forks in the road – between working on "tame" problems (those where there is values agreement and certainty about solutions) and "wicked" problems (those that are resistant to resolution because the opposite is true). We could see that each choice leads to additional forks in the road, that as we build our skill as map-makers, the simple legend we have now (wicked vs. tame problems; the roles of arbiter, advocate and honest broker; means vs. ends; abortion politics and tornado politics) will get more complex, and more useful.

As we applied our new tool to Hurricane Sandy as a case-study, we learned some important things about NCF, placing us on our own emerging map. First we learned that we share some core values:

- A commitment to fairness (“We are rooted in the particular and committed to the universal”)
- A commitment to giving voice to the voiceless and empowering the powerless (“We empower those with the least. We fight for human rights and we are on the front lines.”)
- Focus as opposed to diffusion
- Long-term problem solving as opposed to short-term reaction
- An interest in the “wicked” as opposed to the “tame”
- An interest in the concept of resilience

We also recalled where NCF’s history and tradition place us at the starting point of strategic planning:

- “NCF is rooted in the Jewish tradition and committed to democratic values and social justice, including fairness, diversity and community.”
- “Our Jewish tradition and values propel us to take calculated risks, to be catalysts for change and shape and inspire ourselves and others.”
- “Our openness to learning allows us to stretch ourselves as individuals and as an innovative grant maker.”
- “NCF bets on people when there is guaranteed risk, not guaranteed outcomes. Risk involves cutting-edge ideas, funding at the intersections; it is courageous.”
- “We support thoughtful, at times contrarian, thinking to create better outcomes.”
- “We love to surprise others, and take pride in surprising ourselves.”

The Road Ahead

Knowing some important things about where we are, we’re now ready to start thinking about where we want to go. At each of the next four events in the process we’ll:

- Gain more experience with conceptual map-making, become increasingly fluent with the conceptual tools that allow us to create more complex maps of the world and expand our understanding of the strategic options available to the Foundation even as clarity and focus begin to emerge.
- Present information about the landscape in which we’re operating – what is happening in the world, what are other funders doing, where are there gaps and opportunities, what are our grant partners thinking about?
- Consistently check in with the board on the view that seems to be emerging – to make the implicit explicit (for example, we seem to have chosen to work on wicked problems – is that right?)
- Observe the forks in the road, describe the choices we’re making, and encourage a set of options to emerge as we prepare for the strategic planning retreat in June.

At the June retreat we'll have a set of possible pathways for the board to consider. Each will be consistent with the Foundation's tradition and values and with the choices the board has made at each point in the strategic process up to that time, and, at the same time, present a real alternative. The retreat will provide an opportunity to be experimental and bold, to play with the different choices, consider elements in different combinations, think about how each possible scenario interacts with our shared values and with what we've learned throughout the process.

What's Next?

We'll gather again in January for a brief refresher on map-making and on the map we've begun to make together. We'll hear from a diverse group of leaders on their own strategies, asking them to describe how and why they made the choices they made. We'll then use those strategies as case studies in an exercise designed to give us more experience understanding what the choices are and what we can expect to happen along different pathways, to get clearer about what's likely to work and what isn't. Finally, we'll come back together to check our understanding of what we're learning, try to describe what's emerging and to see where there's agreement and where there's not.

A few final thoughts:

- This initial inquiry stage is about expanding our thinking and our options; if you ever feel that something's being foreclosed that shouldn't be, speak up.
- There are no foregone conclusions about ends or means – the board decides where we're going and how we're going to get there.
- We're making this map together; we're all responsible for modifying, adapting and applying lessons as we go along.
- Our funding partners are with us in recognition of the fact that four institutions that have a shared analysis and common goals will be more effective than any one of them acting alone. That being said, the decision-makers in each organization will make their own strategic choices, and no one outside the NCF board will make decisions for NCF.
- The identification of shared values in our first meeting establishes our basic orientation to the strategic planning task. This can take many sessions in a traditional strategic planning process, and our rapid progress can give us confidence in the strength and utility of the approach we're taking.