

On Philanthropy: White “Allies” Must Go Way Further

Alex Goldman, Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy Blog 2019

As a nearly lifelong organizer, activist, people-mover, change agent, etc., I have navigated through grassroots organizing spaces, institutions of higher education, traditional nonprofits, foundations, and multi-stakeholder collaborations comprised of brilliant leaders from all walks of life. From a young age I was fortunate to be politicized by former Black Panthers, SNCC organizers, [community activists](#), and [young peers](#) of whom I still share deep connection. Both of my mother’s parents emigrated from Mexico to the U.S. as teenage orphans. My grandfather is dark. I have still received the benefit of whiteness my entire life and through every stage of my career.

My realization of this led to a critical moment of self-examination. It also personalized social justice for me as a white-passing straight man in philanthropy. Through this learning journey I have accepted whiteness as central to my identity, as well as an important tool to move our collective goals forward. I adopted a mentality that my social positionality and its derivative characteristics – power, access, accountability, voice, and responsibility – are fundamental pillars in the maze to actualize systemic transformation. To not embrace this notion as praxis (as a white man) in social change work is to reject solidarity and a genuine commitment to building movements resilient enough to facilitate paradigmatic shifts.

In philanthropy we talk at great length about lived experience and assert that those with intimate point of view knowledge should be making decisions and leading. We claim that our roles and our work should be guided by and in service of those most affected. But as many of us know, our sector is [far from that](#). As more voices in philanthropy emerge to challenge assumptions, [transform priorities](#), and reevaluate the criteria for being an [effective funder](#), we have an opportunity to [use privilege](#) as a supplementary strategy to achieve deeper outcomes. As white men with positional power, we must be less destructive where it matters and more impactful when it is needed. Our role is to clear a path for the folks who **know** how to connect the dots and see problems and solutions more clearly than we do. We must do everything we can to make their activities and operations most possible and with less resistance. We must not be complacent or comfortable with how we arrive at our institutional decisions. The consequences can significantly limit the potential of people walking the talk.

I continue to refine my practices and values to leverage myself in service of justice, taking inspiration in part from the work of [Pamela Shifman](#), Executive Director at the NoVo Foundation. The takeaways presented here are an evolving reflection and I hope they can be used as a tool to assess, critique, and build upon. This process also can’t be earmarked as a final product: it is a genuine commitment to building another world. I am 25. It probably won’t be achieved in my lifetime.

1. Know that you don't know: Do not try to know what it is like to be someone with lived experience. Become okay with not knowing. You have a choice to think about the issues, to try to build solutions to the issues, to challenge the systemic nature of the issues. Too many folks do not. The intentionality in authentic solidarity (no one is free until everyone is free) is an empowering path to walk.

2. Own and accept responsibility to develop your own cultural literacy and do the work you need to do: Go beyond a commitment to "do the work." Read, reflect on what you have read, listen in conversation, ask questions, mull, experiment, and vulnerably self-assess. Reexamine yourself in your work, in your role, in your institution, in your community, in your social network, and beyond. This is a life-long **process**. We **must** do this **every** day.

3. Be critically aware of your presence, decisions, behaviors, actions, and reactions, and how they impact others: In any role in philanthropy, you are wielding power. It isn't enough to simply know this. You should know how and to what extent. A good place to start is by assessing how much you speak in a room, especially a room full of grantee partners. Reflect on the behavior you demonstrate and question its nature. Does it create barriers for authenticity to thrive? Is your voice limiting the extent to which others share or shape vision? Do you ask questions to better understand the correlation between your positional power and its broader systemic origins? If so, when do you ask them and to whom? You must accept that you are not entitled to knowledge. Even if you've decided to walk this path, there are delicate and important dynamics you must account for in your process towards critical consciousness. The belief that you are owed any sort of wisdom because you have decided to commit yourself is a fallacy.

4. Understand your capacity for real, necessary feedback: A colleague recently checked me on something I needed to examine. She also told me that there were previous moments when she wanted to check me, but did not feel that we had developed enough trust to do so and was concerned about how I would respond. It took almost two years to arrive here. If this is our standard for collegial relations, we are failing. As white men we must work to build trust that enables us to be checked by our philanthropic peers and our grantee partners, no matter how difficult it is or how long it takes. We need to establish why we are doing what we are doing (in philanthropy and social change work), in what capacity, and to what end. If the version of myself that is needed is not what I initially believed it to be, then that's part of the work too.

5. Own your bottom line: There are those who have made careers out of the pain of others by obtaining knowledge in marginalized communities. What are you driven by and what matters most to you? Is your role benefiting you more than the work? Have you made an intentional decision that you are willing to lose something for the sake of everyone? Not everyone has the luxury to speak freely on contentious issues without

being penalized or having their credibility challenged. Have you thought about the burden that those around you face, and what the shape of your role as an anti-racist advocate must be? Sometimes we need to alleviate the moment. Sometimes we need to take heat. Sometimes we need to accept that we are not heroes; we are support. It takes practice to know how to do this effectively, and it takes commitment to consistently stepping outside comfort zones and being painfully, vulnerably courageous.

This is not a complete checklist or a roadmap or a finalized framework where the process stops and the “ally” cape is awarded, although I encourage you to read further on additional [starting points](#). It’s not really about us at all, or the futures that we as white men envision. We cannot continue to discuss the power inequities in philanthropy while maintaining superficial visions of solidarity. We must do everything we can (and probably more) to build a deeper understanding.

Further Resources:

[How Academia Uses Poverty, Oppression, and Pain for Intellectual Masturbation](#)

[Soul Fire Farm Training, “Uprooting Racism”](#)

[Resisting the Lone Hero Stance](#)

[To Hell With Good Intentions](#)

[White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#)

[Beware of the So-Called Woke Allies](#)

[Shifting Philanthropy from Charity to Justice](#)