Barry Gaberman

Barry Gaberman’s 35 years at the Ford Foundation represent an enormous amount of experience and expertise. What lessons can he distil from them to pass on to those who follow him? Caroline Hartnell talked to him about this, and about what he considers his greatest achievements and his biggest regrets. She also asked him what happens next …

If there’s one lesson that you’d like to pass on to grantmakers from your 35 years of grantmaking, what would it be?

When it gets easy to say no, it’s time to quit.

Had it got easy by the time you quit?

No, it was never easy to say no. But that’s actually a remark that came from a friend and colleague – we used to commute together. I got into the car in a foul mood after work one day, and he said, ‘What’s wrong?’ And I said, ‘I just spent the whole day doing nothing but saying no.’ And he said, ‘Well you know, when it get’s easy to say no, it’s time to look for another job.’ And I thought that was a pretty good remark.

But this tip came from a friend, so I’ll come up with another one. There is something I think we are learning now, but haven’t learned as well as we should, and that is not to see the grant itself as the end point. I think too many grantmakers see it that way. It seems to me that what one needs to do is to think what the problem is that you want to address, craft some sort of strategy that deals with it, and then think of your grants as pieces of activity that implement the strategy. When you think of it in that way, the question of how you’re going to do assessments at the right sort of level comes into focus. Because the tendency is either to do an assessment or evaluation at a very macro level, which has very little punch, or to do it at the grant level, and neither of those is very helpful.

What do you mean by the macro level?

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You look at large societal influences and impacts in particular fields and you assess whether your grantmaking is having some impact on that, and by and large it’s all so far removed from your grants that you can’t really determine much. But if you think in terms of an initiative that has a strategy around it, and the grants implement the strategy, it becomes acceptable to say, ‘Well, if I’m going to spend $10 million on this over the next five years, it’s not unreasonable to spend $500,000 of it assessing while I’m going along where the impact is and where the mid-course corrections have to be and so on.’ So I want to raise the mind-set up to look at that level.

I was also going to ask you for one lesson for international grantmaking specifically, because you’ve done such a lot in that area.

If you’re a grantmaker in one country looking to make grants in another, I think one of the things you could do is make a lot more use of the philanthropic infrastructure in that other country. In most places, though not all, there is some equivalent to an association of grantmakers and that’s a pretty good entry point. Unless you have an office and a field presence that give you a sort of permanence and expertise and entrée, you’ve got to find surrogates for that. We tend to find ours in the intermediary organizations in our own country that do international grantmaking, and it’s useful to think of what some of those might be in other places.

So you might be looking for an association of grantmakers who might put you in touch with other grantmakers?

That’s right, you would learn from the association what some of the important issues are that are being funded domestically, and you would learn who some of the funders are. You might get some suggestions for potential collaborators and you might get some tips about things you need to enter cautiously.

What would your first step be in a country where there isn’t an association of grantmakers – which is still a great many?

Let me put that in the context of one of our values: we want to be close to where the grantmaking is overseas. So we’ve set up a network of field offices, staffed with people who are experts in that particular area, and we’ve given them a great deal of autonomy – because if you’re going to spend the money to set up offices, it seems silly to just jerk them around from the centre. We can do that because we are a large institution, but even for us, as the cost of maintaining people overseas has gone up and up, we’ve had to begin to think of other ways of doing business.

I think there’s a sort of continuum, and the field office is at one end. Then it ranges through having programme officers on the ground, but no other overseas staff, to finding a collegial organization and placing a couple of people from your institution there, which allows you to have a somewhat lighter footprint again and better control of your cost.

Still further along on this continuum, you might consider that you don’t spend enough in an area to justify a presence, but still need to be close to the problem. What we did, for example, with the New Israel Fund was to set up the equivalent of a donor-advised fund within it to do our Israel programming. At the far end of the continuum is finding an appropriate intermediary that you

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can work with that’s being funded from a number of sources that itself might have that expertise and that entrée. Regardless of the scale of your giving, I think you can find a point on that continuum.

**So that ‘appropriate intermediary’ might be a local grantmaker?**

It might be, but it might also be an intermediary in your home country, because you’re not close enough to be able to identify a local institution. In terms of building capacity, you want to be able to get funds directly into local hands, but that’s not always possible.

**You’ve been 35 years at the Ford Foundation. What’s the one thing you’ve done there that you’re most proud of?**

Well, there are a lot of things you get to be part of and some might not have anything to do with grantmaking. For example, I started out in Indonesia. At that time the administrative side of our field office was run by a foreigner, and when the time came to replace that person, I felt that we shouldn’t be replacing that foreigner with another foreigner, but hiring Indonesians to take on tasks like grants administration and accounting. So one of the things I’m most proud of is having been a part of building the capacity of local staff to do that, and seeing them become much more powerful contributors to our field offices. Also, these folks become the repository of the institutional memory of the foundation. In particular locations, our programme officers are in and out in five and six year chunks.

So that’s one at the very beginning of my time at the Ford Foundation. Another is right at the end – the International Initiative to Strengthen Philanthropy. Again that’s somewhat atypical, because by and large what we do is make grants to work on particular issues, and this was an initiative to build philanthropy locally. That’s important. If you’re going to sustain civil society over time, you’re going to have to deal with the fickleness of foreign donors, or the vulnerability that foreign donors might thrust on you, and the way to do that is to make sure you’ve got a base of support within the country.

**Could you say a little bit about the initiative?**

It was difficult in the beginning to convince our own staff, because they tend to take a substantive view of things, and because it means giving up power, and programme officers in general don’t like to give up power.

The initiative has two phases. There was an initial phase of building foundations, and my own observation from that is that if you’re not going to stick with this for at least a ten-year period, then don’t bother getting involved, because it takes about that long from the beginning of the idea to a functioning institution. A cluster of those institutions had survived and were functioning but were still quite marginal players. The International Initiative to Strengthen Philanthropy is premised on a ‘second bounce’, on mining what you’ve done before you move on. It involves putting that cohort of foundations together to enhance their capacity on the one hand and their financial resources on the other, so they’re able to be more significant players in their contexts. And that was something that I particularly enjoyed and was proud of.

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You said that it involves giving up power – is that because the programme officers are not having input into the content?

That’s right, they don’t get to control the agenda, and because of that they tend to think that they’re giving up power, and that they’re being moved out of direct work in an area by this other institution. If you’re a professional in communal forestry, for example, the fact that you have to work to set up an institution that may decide to look at urban housing doesn’t really sit well with you! But it seems to me that their thinking is wrong here, because whenever you set up a new institution with resources, you gain another partner to work on a problem with.

Is there anything you’d particularly have liked to do while you were at Ford but haven’t managed to do?

Yes, there’s one thing that I really must say I regret. And that is that I never had the clout or the time to put together the kind of working group that would have been necessary to do the appropriate visioning exercise for the infrastructure of philanthropy and civil society in the United States.

What happened over the period of exceedingly robust foundation budgets is that we allowed a plethora of new infrastructure organizations to come into existence without much regard to how they would be sustainable. When the world changed after 9/11, and when significant funders dropped out of the infrastructure business in the United States, we realized that in all likelihood some institutions would go out of business – and they have – and others would have to operate at a much more modest scale. And still others would have to, if not merge, find ways to carve strategic alliances so that they could be more cost-effective. It seems to me that what’s needed is for the core infrastructure groups to get together to define a vision of what the infrastructure is all about, and what part in that infrastructure each is going to play, but what has in fact predominated has been a set of one-off conversations between individual infrastructure institutions and individual funders.

I don’t want to lay all the blame on the infrastructure groups, because the funders collectively needed to be part of that conversation. Maybe having lost a number of the big funders made it tougher to do; maybe the fact that some institutions felt that their survival was at stake made it harder for them to collaborate; maybe we were just ineffective in our few attempts to try to do it, but it’s something that never got done, and it’s one thing that I regret.

But you did start to bring funders together with the GuideStar consortium?

What I learned from that experience is that you need two things to bring together a consortium of donors to fund something. Number one, it needs to be something that already has support from a good swathe of donors, and number two it needs to be facing a significant crisis. In the GuideStar case, they needed $12-13 million to survive and there were about a dozen funders interested in it. What everyone saw right away was that we needed to get together a consortium and make a decision. Otherwise what would happen was that say six of the institutions would provide half of the money, and GuideStar would go down the tube anyway and we’d have wasted $6 million. So we decided either to get together or to forget it.
Weren’t there moves after that to make something more formal and ongoing out of that group?

It didn’t work. I didn’t have enough clout and partners that would normally have had the clout to add to it, like Packard and Atlantic, had dropped out of the picture. You couldn’t get the funders to agree and you couldn’t get the infrastructure groups to collaborate.

Were they asked to collaborate?

I think it was fairly clear that they were being asked to collectively come up with some sort of vision. The meetings we did have were very carefully structured so there would be opportunities for just the infrastructure groups to be together, and opportunities for just the funders to be together, and opportunities for both to be together, so there would be sort of safe places for the different groups to talk. Not having been at the infrastructure ones, I never found the meetings when we were together collectively or when just the funders were together to be terribly satisfying.

When was the date of the GuideStar consortium?

There were two bites at that apple. The initial one was in 2001 when GuideStar needed about $12-13 million, which was meant to capitalize GuideStar over a five-year period to the point where it was earning a fair amount of its revenues and the subsidy part was sustainable. About three years into this, it turned out that the $12-13 million dollars was not going to be sufficient, and another infusion of capital was needed. So we pulled the consortium together again. At this point, the dozen funders had shrunk to six, and the amount of money that we could collectively come up with had also shrunk to about the $5-6 million range – which was enough, as it turned out, but we could not have come up with 12 million bucks.

With you retiring now and Susan Berresford retiring in just over a year, do you anticipate major changes at Ford?

Yes and no. No, because the Ford Foundation is an institution that has a pretty clear set of values and a pretty good sense of how it does its business. It’s somewhat sui generis in that, with the exception of the Open Society Institute more recently, there isn’t really any other organization with enough of a network overseas, for example, that it could claim to have a sort of global footprint – though I think that’s stretching it a bit for Ford, not for OSI necessarily. Those things have survived pretty much intact from Mac Bundy to Franklin Thomas to Susan Berresford, and will probably survive to the next person.

Having said that, someone once asked me whatever had happened to the really interesting memo he had written about charting a new course for the foundation in a particular large field, and I said, ‘You can go and look at the files.’ We’ve got hundreds of memos like that that nobody did anything about because of when the memo was written. The point in time when major changes in fields take place is when you have a change at the top, and that’s when structure and substance do get moved around a bit. So if that same memo had come at such a time, it might have been part of a discourse that would have led to something different.

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Look at Rockefeller as an example – it went through a series of presidencies without fundamental change in the areas in which it does its grantmaking, and now you’ve got a new president who is asking some much more basic questions which are likely to lead to a big change there. So I’m always aware of the possibility that that could happen at Ford.

But changes in leadership can be very productive times, without fundamental changes. When Susan Berresford took over from Franklin Thomas, we had a potentially embarrassing situation, in that after Susan was appointed, Frank was still going to be there for 17 months. But Susan and Frank turned that potentially awkward moment into one that was productive. It allowed Susan the space to really think about what the foundation ought to look like under her leadership, and gave her some time off to talk to people and think. The result was the addition of a couple of interesting new areas to our work – the consideration of spirituality and religion and its impact on behaviour, and going beyond the reproductive rights and reproductive health programme to look at sexuality as an area of work.

Can we go on to what you’re going to do next? I’m sitting here in Salzburg at a seminar with you on the future of philanthropy, so you’re clearly not dropping right out of the field – and I know you’re going to be at the WINGS Forum.

I’m hoping to organize my life in three buckets. Bucket number one is not to make the fact that I’ve retired a lie, but to really have some time – time to spend with grandchildren and to travel for reasons other than that there is a conference or a field office that you have to visit.

The second bucket is that I’m going to be working on a documentary with my daughter, who is a filmmaker. It will look at a number of major international events, starting with the pogroms in Russia at the turn of the last century, then going on to the Russo-Japanese war, the First World War, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Japanese occupation of the mainland of China, the Second World War, the communist takeover of China, and the partition in the Middle East.

The idea is that you can study all those events at a macro level, but it’s also interesting to look at them from the point of view of how a family makes decisions about how it adapts for the sake of its safety and security. My grandparents decided to leave Odessa – then Russia, now the Ukraine – during the pogroms. They went east rather than west, with the idea that they could get to the United States. That’s why both my father and I were born in China. But it’s a story about leaving Odessa at one point in time to follow a dream about getting to the United States, and actually not getting there till my father arrived 50 years later. And all the things that happened along the way.

And your third bucket?

The third bucket is really to find ways to not entirely fall off the cliff in terms of what I’ve spent more than half of my life doing. So I want to engage in the discourse about philanthropy and civil society, and to do that I hope by a little writing, a little teaching, and being part of a number of seminars and conferences like this one.

I also like the idea of being freed up to do that in a way that you can do when you’ve found your own voice, because you’re not institutionally bound any more. When you’re part of an institution...
and part of its leadership structure, you have certain responsibilities that do constrain what you can say and where you can say it. So hopefully there’ll be a little more freedom.

**I’m still hoping that a column in *Alliance* is going to be a little part of that bucket.**

Well we can certainly talk about that, if you’ll give me just a little space to learn this new rhythm of life.

**Thank you very much, Barry.**