



Better Funding Practices:

The Role of Funders as Sounding Boards

INTRODUCTION

The role of funders in social change is evolving. Funders are increasingly recognizing the importance of true partnership, of standing alongside the organizations and leaders they support, and working to address some of the inherent power imbalances involved with funding. One powerful way to embody this partnership is by serving as a trusted sounding board.

This form of "beyond financial" support can help strengthen organizations, empower leaders, and deepen the relationship between funders and grantee partners. In doing so, funders contribute not just to programmatic outcomes, but to long-term resilience and impact.



Why Offer Sounding Board Support?



Leading a community-based organization can be a lonely and emotionally taxing experience. Leaders often carry immense responsibility, navigating resource constraints, systemic barriers, and the constant pressure to deliver impact. Too often, they do so without a safe space to reflect, share concerns, or test new ideas.

Funders — who may have a bird’s-eye view of the sector — are well positioned to offer empathetic, non-judgmental, and trusted listening support. This doesn’t mean becoming operational advisors, offering unsolicited advice or taking over strategic decisions. It means being present, engaged, empathetic and available.

Sounding board support can:



Combat isolation among the leaders of community-based organizations and social innovators.



Strengthen trust and transparency between funders and grantee partners.



Encourage honest dialogue about challenges, rather than performative reporting.



Provide a window into real-time needs, insights, and barriers on the ground.



Build leadership confidence during moments of change or uncertainty.

Importantly, this kind of support costs nothing beyond providing staff time, but can be invaluable.

How to Be an Effective Sounding Board



Becoming a trusted sounding board doesn't require a new initiative or extra funding, it's about intentional practice. Here are a few guiding principles:

1

Replace Written Reports with Conversations

Replace formal written reporting with informal check-ins or reflective calls. This humanizes the relationship and creates space for authentic dialogue.

2

Create a Safe, Judgment-Free Zone

Let partners know explicitly that your check-ins are not evaluative. Make it clear that honesty will not result in funding penalties or reputational harm.

3

Listen More Than You Speak

Practice deep, empathetic listening. Let partners set the agenda and speak openly. Be mindful not to dominate the conversation.

4

Respect Lived Expertise

Avoid jumping in with unsolicited advice. Trust that your partners understand their communities and context better than anyone else.

5

Be Proactive During Times of Challenge

When you know a partner is navigating difficulty: organizational change, crises, or external shocks, reach out with an open door and a listening ear. Sometimes the offer of a conversation is support enough.



What Does This Look Like in Practice?



“Having funders be a sounding board helped me personally when I took on the leadership role at ECF during the pandemic. Whilst dealing with pandemic-related challenges, I was also dealing with my own vulnerability-related challenges in a new role. Having funders who listened to me and who were there for me when I needed someone to talk things through with, helped build my confidence to guide ECF through our challenges.”

— Anjana Goswami, Equal Community Foundation (ECF)

This example reflects how sounding board support can go beyond organizational benefit, it can empower and affirm the leadership of individuals at the helm of social change.

Final Thoughts

Sounding board support is a simple yet transformative shift in how funders relate to their partners. It requires no extra budget - only intentionality, humility, and a commitment to deeper listening. When funders step into this role, they build trust, foster resilience, and contribute meaningfully to the long-term success of the people and organizations driving social change.

Being a funder is not just about what you give, it's also about how you show up.