

The Power of Foundations as Community Conveners



More and more these days, we hear a rising desire from foundations across the impact ecosystem to take a more active role in their focal issue areas and to move those relationships beyond sending out a few checks each year. These leading foundations want to foster deeper learning, spark connections, and break down silos. They want to support true collaboration. The good news is that, as foundations, you hold a unique position of privilege and power when it comes to catalyzing this deeper, more meaningful engagement. The even better news is that you're likely already filling that role to some extent (though you may not realize it) and that there are simple principles and practices that can help you step more fully into it and start leveraging the power of community convening in your work.

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The Impact Convening Ecosystem

Keystone Convenings

For more than a decade, the impact convening ecosystem has been anchored by a handful of keystone convenings. The Skoll World Forum began in 2004 and focuses on highlighting and connecting the work of global award-winning social entrepreneurs, funders, and activists. The Opportunity Collaboration is a 400-participant un-conference (no panels, no plenaries, 100% participant-driven content) that celebrated its 10th Anniversary in 2018. Since 2001, the Global Philanthropy Forum has been connecting grantmakers and impact investors into peer learning communities aimed at improved collaboration and greater impact. The Clinton Global Initiative (est. 2005) advanced the action-orientation of impact convening with its commitment-centric agenda. Possibly the largest impact-focused convening, each year Social Capital Markets (SOCAP) brings together more than 3,000 cross-sector changemakers focused on financing social good.

Exponential Explosion

More recently, we've seen an explosion of impact-focused convenings. Conveners.org Global Events Calendar lists hundreds each year, and new forums, symposiums, conferences, and showcases emerge each year. Universities, foundations, and corporations are at the heart of this global explosion.

As interest in social responsibility (especially social entrepreneurship and impact investing) has surged among Millennials, social innovation programs and sustainable degrees are cropping up at universities and graduate schools around the world. In the US, nearly every major private and several large public universities host impact-focused convenings for their students each year. Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Northwestern, Wharton, and MIT are joined by Indiana University, University of Colorado, and NYU. Many institutions, like the University of San Diego, Hult International Business School, and Brigham Young University, have also launched social impact business plan and case competitions.



The corporate world has also been riding the groundswell. There are major convenings focused on green/sustainable business, cause marketing, and social entrepreneurship. Companies host convenings to strategize and report on their social good efforts and learn the latest trends in corporate social responsibility, as well as to actually facilitate their 'give-back' initiatives; connecting world-changing efforts to the capital (financial, human, and otherwise) they need to succeed.

But perhaps the greatest growth in recent years has sprung from foundations (public and private) and NGOs stepping into their role, and their potential power, as community conveners. Network organizations like Feeding America convene for capacity-building and training. Support organizations like Foundation Center, NTEN (Non Profit Technology conference), Seattle International Foundation, and the Center for High Impact Philanthropy convene to support and advance the work of NGOs themselves. Foundations like MacArthur, Kellogg, Robert Wood Johnson and the Segal Family Foundation host convenings to connect and support their grantees. Others, from Rockefeller Foundation to the Central Valley Community Foundation have adopted convening as a programmatic focus—betting on the direct impact of orchestrating and supporting stakeholder gatherings on their core missions.

The Next Wave: Niches, Intersections and Localization

As the social good movement grows, impact convenings are becoming more and more focused, more and more targeted in their audience and objectives. Whereas many of the pioneer convenings were aimed at outreach, awareness-building, recruiting players into the movement and giving them a baseline understanding; today's convenings tend to surface around niche audiences and intersections. These days, for example, there are dozens of impact convenings looking at social good through a gender lens ([High Water Women](#), [Women Deliver](#), [Gender Smart Investing Summit](#), [World-Changing Women's Summit](#)); dozens more focused on how technology can advance social good ([PopTech!](#), [Mashable's Social Good Summit](#), [WORLDZ](#)) and further

dozens digging in on climate strategy ([UN Climate Action Summit](#), [Climate Change Week NYC](#), [Forum for the Future](#)). The next wave of relevant impact convenings is beginning to emerge at the intersections of these niches: think women in technology ([eMerge Americas](#), [NCWIT Summit on Women and IT](#), [Women in Tech Africa](#)), technology for climate action ([Climate Action Tech](#), [City Tech Collaborative](#), [Tech4Climate](#)), etc.

There is further momentum around localization, with impact conveners recognizing that while there is a place for grand, global gatherings, there is often even greater power to be leveraged through hyper-local communities of practice gathering around hyper-local issues and efforts ([ConnectUP! MN](#)).



Foundations as Community Conveners

You're a Convener, Whether You Know it or Not

Whether or not you've ever put on an annual conference, or even brought grantees together for a formal collaboration session, foundations are hubs in the social good network by their very nature and place in the resource chain. And most foundations have a great deal more potential to step into that role and leverage their power than they are currently utilizing. Let's look at some of the factors that give foundations inherent power and influence as conveners:

- 1 Foundations connect key players throughout the resource chain of impact work.** They form a natural bridge between donors and practitioners, between theory and application. Holding deep relationships with (and accountability to) both the sources and recipients of funding, foundations can leapfrog much of the time, effort, and investment required to build the trust and buy-in it takes to even get these key players in the room.
- 2 Foundations (and their roles) are stable members of that resource chain,** whereas other players flow in and out. Across the years, individual donors funding your work will increase and decrease their commitments, change their strategic focus, spend down endowments and more. Similarly, individual grantee organizations will emerge and dissolve, research will validate evolving approaches, and politics will shift. As a foundation, your engagement with an issue rides out this fluctuation, and you remain an anchor for your community's work around it.
- 3 A Foundation's role as funder confers power to bring parties together.** This can be a difficult truth to acknowledge. The neutral role (facilitator, observer) is often presented as the ideal. However, as a foundation bringing together organizations you fund (or even may fund someday) that neutral role isn't truly an option. It is critical to remain aware of and sensitive to

the power dynamics inherent in your convenings, and the effect they can have on how those you convene 'show up.' Still, their existence is a reason to lean in (mindfully) rather than shy away from your opportunities to convene.

- 4 Effective convenings require resources—**especially if you want to go beyond the typical structures and engagement styles. **Foundations are uniquely qualified to provide the resources needed for a convening to be truly impactful.** Donors may have the resources but lack the expertise. NGOs bring the expertise, but lack the resources it takes to convene well. As a foundation, you are the bridge between resources and expertise—carrying both the deep knowledge of what conversations/engagements are needed to move the work forward, and the power to dedicate funding to creating those interactions.
- 5 Foundations are uniquely positioned to engage as low-ego conveners.** With their systems-view of the issue and the position of power they hold in the resource chain, foundations can set the tone for stakeholder interactions—fostering an environment of trust, openness and learning. When it comes to building coalitions, facilitating compromise, and fostering true collaboration, never underestimate the power of a low-ego convener.

Easy First Steps to Leverage Your Convening Power

The most fundamental piece of advice we can offer to foundations stepping into their role as community conveners is "Purpose First." Organizing convenings can be a daunting task, and it's easy to slip into "content first," "logistics first" or even "speaker first" mentality. Any time you bring a group together, begin by defining the success metrics of the convening. The gurus at [Caspian Agency](#) share a foundation for designing Purpose First

events: The “GOT’M” framework—defining the Goal, Outcomes, Tactics and Measurement for the convening puts experience design, logistics, content (and, yes, even speakers) in the proper order, and holds them in the proper relationship.



Goal: What is the objective/vision of the convening? How would you complete the sentence “We are convening to...”? *Example - We are convening to foster collaboration amongst projects and organizations supporting veterans across our community.*



Outcomes: What will happen for your stakeholders if you accomplish the goal? What does success look like? *Example - Our grantees will make new connections at other organizations working on different aspects of the veteran experience.*



Tactics: What kinds of interactions, activities, experiences will lead to the desired outcomes? *Example - “Speed Dating” session; quick, structured introductions to a high number of organizations in a short amount of time.*



Measurement: How will you know whether your tactics had the desired effect? *Example - all attendees will come away with at least 1 new connection. 50% of attendees will come away with 5 or more new relationships.*

There are any number of impactful objectives for a Purpose First foundation convening. You could bring groups together for **issue-based collaboration**. The [C&A Foundation](#) brings together groups of organizations from all over the world, each working to advance the equity and sustainability of the garment industry, to

share best practices and challenges. These convenings help set the strategic direction and funding priorities for the foundation. You could convene to provide **capacity building and technical support** to grantees and others working on your target issue. [Draper Richards Kaplan](#) routinely sources shared gaps and challenges from their grantee cohorts and brings together expert advice and solutions to help address them. These convenings magnify their efficiency by using one set of resources to improve the performance of multiple individual grantees. You could convene to **foster connections across the value chain**. A brilliant example of low-ego convening, the [Utah Community Foundation](#) has expanded their work in Donor Advised Funds to bring together a network of funders for showcases of the best community solutions. These convenings leverage the Foundation’s reputation to foster increased and diversified funding for their grantees. You could convene to **advance understanding of an issue** and evolve the theories of change around it. The [Hewlett Foundation’s](#) Climate & Energy group launched a specialized series of convenings for groups working on decarbonizing financial portfolios. The conversations have advanced the theoretical debate and exposed opportunities for authentic collaboration. Finally, you could convene to **support collective action**. As an implementation partner (though not the principle funder) for a major statewide economic development effort, the [Central Valley Community Foundation](#) has brought together a diverse group of stakeholders representing policy, research, advocacy, implementation and funders to co-create a pilot program. These convenings have advanced a shared definition of the problem as well as the design for a coordinated multi-stakeholder solution.



Better Practices to Up Your Game

With the foundation of “Purpose First” convenings firmly in place, there are many ways to deepen and refine your convening strategy for greater impact:

- **Remember that your participants are your biggest asset.** Rather than treating them as passive receptacles for knowledge or support, focus on connecting them. Give them space to interact authentically and focus your efforts on fostering those interactions
- **Choose (and intentionally design) your space according to the interactions you want to foster.** How will dozens of simultaneous conversations affect the noise level in this room? Are we expecting participants to stand when what we want to encourage is in-depth conversations? Does this seating arrangement communicate the way we actually see our participants in relation to each other and to us?
- **Consider a progression of “Awareness, Alignment, Collaboration” when you want to encourage partnerships, coalitions, and collective action.** An investment in the baseline of in-depth shared understandings and consensus will pay dividends when it comes to fostering true collaboration.
- **Incorporate rituals.** Build traditions that reinforce your role as a steady force in the community and build a culture around what it means to engage in social change work in your community. Use ritual to reinforce your core values as you interact with others.
- **Clearly communicate when you shift the depth of engagement expected from your participants.** Establish permission with the group to move through head, heart, and soul level interactions, setting expectations around trust, openness, and the freedom to fully express authentic emotion as you go.
- **Know that diversity, accessibility, and inclusion require an investment; of focus, of time, and of finances.** They also require a plan D (because plan A through C are almost guaranteed to fail along the way).
- **Keep the power dynamics at play in your group top-of-mind as you seek to engage all relevant stakeholders.** Rather than pretending such relationships don't exist (or that you and your partners have somehow managed to transcend them) there is power in naming the dynamics your identity and role create, and holding space for all participants to do the same.
- **Prioritize long-term engagements to foster real collaboration.** Hold space for and foster partnerships that grow and evolve over years, and even decades. The most powerful collaborations require the kind of long-term “care and feeding” that you, as foundations, are uniquely positioned to provide.



Convening and the SDGs

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals—launched in 2012—represent an evolution in thinking around, and global commitment to, solving the most pressing challenges facing society and the world. Growing out of the Millennium Development Goals, this set of 17 focus areas (with their accompanying indicators and success metrics) can provide a guiding framework for foundations and NGOs. The goals provide a common language around the impact we're striving for; and highlight the interconnectivity of issue areas, supporting systems thinking and collaboration.

The Goals:



No Poverty



Reducing Inequality



Zero Hunger



Sustainable Cities and Communities



Good Health and Well-being



Responsible Consumption and Production



Quality Education



Climate Action



Gender Equality



Life Below Water



Clean Water and Sanitation



Life On Land



Affordable and Clean Energy



Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions



Decent Work and Economic Growth



Partnerships for the Goals.



Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure

The Special Role of Goal 17

One of the key evolutions from the Millennium Development Goals to the SDGs is the inclusion of Goal 17 - Partnerships for the Goals. This goal explicitly acknowledges both the inextricable linkages between every issue we could choose to focus on, and the importance of bridging the knowledge, resource, and action silos that so often fragment our work on them. Convening is a core strategy for advancing Goal 17, and Goal 17 is a key lever for significant progress on every other goal.

Convening17 - Building Partnerships for the Goals

[Conveners.org](#) is working to activate that power through a new collaborative model called [Convening17](#). We curate communities of experts and influencers working on a particular SDG from every angle; researchers, policy leaders, corporations, NGOs, entrepreneurs and funders, and partner with top international convenings (the marquee events where these folks already gather to catalyze forward motion around the issue) to host a series of conversations to identify the major levers of change available to the group, source and evaluate solutions, and strategize on how to support replication and scale of those solutions, with a special focus on capital flow.

In 2017, we piloted this process with a focus on SDG4 - Quality Education. Through a series of nine curated conversations, this dynamic group surfaced a unique lever for change that went well beyond the conversations typical around global education efforts (new schools, increased enrollment, even gender parity). Instead, they honed in on a root barrier to quality education with potential for outsized impact in the coming decade: a focus on trauma-informed education, particularly for forcibly displaced children.

Since identifying that key lever, this continually-evolving group of stakeholders has identified a few hallmark solutions, exponentially expanded their visibility in the global education community, and begun working to expand the resource flow to them. We've experienced similar successes with the communities focused on SDG5 - Gender Equality and SDG14 - Life Below Water, launched in 2019.

The Convening17 experiment has left us even more convinced of the profound power of purposeful convening to foster truly transformative progress around the SDGs. We invite you to join us in fostering this kind of connection, coordination and collaboration within your communities and across the impact ecosystem. As foundations, you are uniquely positioned to do so, and do so well.



About Blackbaud

Leading uniquely at the intersection point of technology and social good, Blackbaud connects and empowers organizations to increase their impact through cloud software, services, expertise, and data intelligence. We serve the entire social good community, which includes nonprofits, foundations, companies, education institutions, healthcare organizations, and the individual change agents who support them.

