Who is Working Well Together?

Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

Regional funder in the South adopts network-focused approach to grantmaking.

Type of funder	Private Foundation
Geography/Issue Area	Southeastern United States
When founded	1953
Total assets (as of FY 2013)	$182 million
Annual giving (as of FY 2013)	$7 million
Number of staff	10
Website	www.mrbf.org
Brief description of the program/ practice being discussed	Changing program officer role to network officers and providing "network glue" to promote collaboration.

1. Describe the situation or practice.

Founded in 1953, the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation has a long history of working to help people and communities in the Southeastern United States move out of poverty. Over the last several years, the grantmaker has become more intentional about supporting nonprofit and philanthropic networks that are working to achieve this goal.

The Babcock networking approach evolved naturally from the foundation's work from 1995 - 2005 building a peer network to support its organizational development program and in supporting community problem-solving efforts that focused on coalitions that crossed race and class lines. Based on a formal review of its program in 2004, Babcock designed its new strategies around the idea that a network approach is critical for impact on poverty and particularly for policy and systems change.

Babcock revised its application process and staffing around place-based strategies that emphasized building networks, facilitating collaboration, introducing grantees to leaders and best practices in their fields, and bringing them together to explore common challenges and solutions. Another priority is leading and participating in philanthropy networks to ensure that Babcock is

working in concert with other foundations with shared goals for reducing poverty in the region.

"Don't create new networks. Start with existing groups. Invest in networks that are naturally occurring and on the verge of making important strategic connections. Simply put, know the system in which you're intervening and look for efforts already under way that you might amplify."
— Gayle Williams, former Executive Director

2. What have you tried to do differently?

The Babcock Foundation adopted a network focus and is looking to grow existing relationships and deepen its support for the work grantee partners are already doing. This type of grantmaking can be seen in three key areas: its creation of a network officer position to replace the traditional program officer role; its support for multiple member organizations in networks, and the "network glue" that keeps nonprofit coalitions together; and its participation in philanthropic networks.

The Network Officer
The staff and board at Babcock have reconfigured the role of program officers so they serve as network officers. Their new charge: to identify opportunities for grantees and others to work together on issues, and to seek ways to provide the glue support that will make those collaborations successful.

"We don't want to be in people's business all the time, so this is more about knowing what's happening in the field and how things are moving to scale — and what nonprofits need to get there," said Gladys Washington, program director with the foundation.

Douglas Easterling, an associate professor at Wake Forest University School of Medicine, described the role of the Babcock Foundation's network officers in a *Foundation Review* [article](#) in 2012. "Rather than simply providing a network with a grant and monitoring the network's progress, the network officer works directly and actively with members of the network to hone strategy, identify emerging opportunities and build the network's capacity to achieve outcomes," Easterling wrote.

Easterling pinpointed several roles and responsibilities of the network officers, including: using personal contacts and reconnaissance to learn about networks that might warrant investment by the foundation; helping nonprofits connect to other organizations where there might be mutual benefit;

determining how the foundation can best support the work of networks; and keeping in touch with grantee networks and their members to help ensure they have the support they need.

Network Glue

The Babcock Foundation's support for grantee networks can include funding for staff positions, core operations, convenings or activities designed to build organizational and network capacity. Babcock describes what it looks for in networks on its website:

> "At all levels of funding, we look for goal-oriented, flexible relationships among the nonprofit, public and private sector players necessary for leveraging resources in order to achieve large-scale impact. The networks may be formal or informal, short-term or long-term, and structured in a variety of ways. We expect network structure, membership, relationships and strategies to evolve over time to get the job done effectively and democratically."

In an example of how the grantmaker supports networks, the Babcock Foundation recently supported a convening of nonprofits in Appalachia to explore the challenges involved with communicating a vision of a new, sustainable economy as the coal industry and jobs in mining leave the region. The Appalachian Transition Communications Summit brought together 26 representatives from 17 groups in West Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina and Virginia. During the summit, participants began to identify shared priorities and next steps, including public opinion research and the development of common framing and messaging.

Another Babcock Foundation grantee, the Central Appalachian Network, is a group of six nonprofits that are working together to explore how to build sustainable economies throughout the region. The network recently turned its attention to creating thriving local food economies and is supporting efforts to build the local food infrastructure and make connections among producers, processors, distributors, farmers markets and other participants in local and regional food markets. Through its member organizations, CAN collectively provides training, technical assistance and other support to more than 1,000 family farmers and food producers annually. The foundation produced a paper on CAN, which is available on its [website](#).

Funder Networks

Based on the belief that philanthropy should not be encouraging grantees to collaborate without taking the same medicine itself, the Babcock Foundation also is a leader in establishing and sustaining funder networks working on poverty issues in the Southeast. Babcock Network Officer Lavastian Glenn, for example, was instrumental in starting Grantmakers for Southern Progress.

Led by a steering committee of national and regional funders, this group launched a new research initiative, As the South Goes, aimed at supporting the effort to attract new philanthropic support for social justice in the South. The network's goal is to become a hub for foundations seeking to reduce poverty in the region.

In the same way that Glenn was critical to forming Grantmakers for Southern Progress, Babcock Deputy Director and Network Officer Sandra Mikush was a co-founder of the Appalachia Funders Network. This group of public and private grantmakers is working to align their grantmaking around a common framework with the goal of accelerating a just and sustainable economic transition of the Appalachian region. Activities include annual gatherings, sponsored research and collaborative projects to advance promising economic sectors.

3. What has been the result?

Easterling's 2012 analysis of the Babcock Foundation's network-focused work identified a number of ways in which networks have benefited from the grantmaker's support. Representatives of five organizations participating in Babcock Foundation-supported networks said they valued their network officer's "initiative in connecting their organization to others that were interested in advancing systems change throughout the region." The interviewees also cited a number of other important roles that the network officers played in supporting their work, including:

- Bringing new knowledge to the network's thought process;

- Promoting more systems-level thinking;

- Asking hard questions that caused the network to drill down to core issues;

- Forcing the group to consider its underlying purpose; and

- Continually encouraging the network to adapt its strategy in the face of successive obstacles.

"In addition to helping networks to clarify their goals and to adopt more informed and deliberate strategies, interviewees were grateful for the work that network officers did to connect their networks to funders. These referrals not only led to new resources, but also conferred a sense of legitimacy on networks and the organizations in those networks," Easterling wrote.

4. What are your key insights from doing the work?

Easterling's research also pointed to several challenges connected to the Babcock Foundation's hands-on approach and emphasis on meeting people where they are in order to support the work, organizations and networks that already exist. Chief among the challenges is ensuring that the foundation and its staff can sustain the patience and focus to work with networks over the long haul. "Long-term funding and relationships are required of the foundation, which in turn requires continual reaffirmation of the larger strategy on the part of both the staff and the board," Easterling wrote.

Another important challenge Easterling noted is knowing when to be hands-on and when to be hands-off. He wrote that Babcock Foundation staff are "acutely aware" of such risks as the foundation staff being viewed as intrusive by network participants, or, alternatively, of networks becoming overly reliant on a network officer's involvement and access to resources. He wrote that the foundation's staff keep an "arms-length distance" and "make a deliberate effort to maintain an 'outsider' role when working with networks."