RELATIONSHIPS AS INFRASTRUCTURE IN SOUTHERN AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

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Development and Training Resources

In human society, relationships act as a basic infrastructure, providing an underlying framework for getting things done. They are the DNA of social and economic systems, and reflect culture, history and individual experience. Culture is the medium through which relationships are understood, experienced and negotiated.

In the culture of the Southern African American philanthropic organizations we visited, relationships were a strong, vibrant and highly nuanced infrastructure that operated from a spiritual imperative. That is, relationships were never just between the individuals involved. They also included the presence, stated or not, of God—a higher power, an arbiter of rightness, a vision of wholeness and relatedness.

The requirements of this presence led to the development of certain skills that permeate the infrastructure of relationships with strength, depth and resiliency. While these skills are common in many African American communities, they often go unnoticed—even by people who have them. They are taken for granted, or misnamed, becoming visible only by their absence.

Yet the exercise of these skills is often admired and celebrated with amazement by the larger society with phrases like:

> *"Although, he often had to overcome racial barriers and discrimination, he was never bitter."*

> *"She never allowed racial prejudice and discrimination to prevent her from reaching out to people and forming the kinds of partnerships that made her so effective."*

These skills are not easily developed; they are the result of minute-by-minute choices in circumstances that range from mildly annoying to horrendously difficult. They include the ability to reflect deeply, see fearlessly, act courageously and to hold a vision regardless of one's surroundings. They require the ultimate engagement of the whole self.

While the spiritual imperative permeating relationships was obvious in faith-based projects such as Faith Partnerships in Raleigh and the Institute for Church Administration and Management in Atlanta, it was also a very strong factor in secular organizations, such as the Black Belt Community Foundation, initiated in 2004.

Example

The **Black Belt Community Foundation (BBCF),** based in Selma, Ala., was formed in a highly polarized environment, made more contentious by hotly contested local elections. Our visit took place the day before the local election.

During the previous election, the tower of the 50,000 watt African American-owned radio station was bombed, and the African American state senator who now sits on the BBCF board received death threats. A White woman who had held a local office for several years was being ostracized and targeted for defeat by the white community because she had said that the Ku Klux Klan was wrong.

In this environment, courageous people formed a community foundation whose vision is a transformed Black Belt region, where all residents contribute to healthy communities and a productive regional economy, for the benefit of all its citizens. The board is intentionally diverse with White and African American members, women and men, grassroots and highly influential people, younger and older people. The networks represented by this board are formidable. There is a state legislator; a vice president of Auburn University; executives of local industries and a state utility; an editor of a local newspaper; and executive directors of regional nonprofits and commissions. While board members are participating as individuals rather than as formal representatives of institutions, the historical significance of their institutional connections and availability cannot be overstated.

The concept for BBCF and its core leadership comes from the African American community, who in turn invited the White community to join their efforts to make the foundation reflective of all people in the community. They have been effective in their efforts to create a board that is inclusive, yet it wasn't easy.

Individual board members were chosen with great care and with much discussion. Effort was made to choose Whites who were not afraid to interact with African Americans on an equitable basis, and who had demonstrated an ability to stand up for what they believed. A significant number of African Americans were chosen who were in powerful or highly visible positions and had strong family ties to grassroots folks. They could function in European American and African American cultural modalities on a variety of social and economic levels, and they were willing to build bridges. As one board member said:

> We chose the right White people and the right Black people. Being able to talk about race issues is paramount… We have had the right White people at the right time. They understand that this foundation will not accept past structural inequities. They will be powerful ambassadors for the foundation.

Developing and applying such highly nuanced criteria required intense, honest discussion and a profound depth of analysis—of personal qualities, external conditions and history.

It is an example of the qualities of trust, cooperation and mutual assistance *as they were understood in the African American community*.

It required a core of people on the board to *embody* these questions that are personal, structural and spiritual:

1. Are you willing to see through the eyes of a higher power? (By faith, you must be able to move beyond your own ambitions, wounds and fears to a bigger vision.)

2. Can you understand another's world? (You must be willing to understand, with compassion, worlds in which you do not live and which may be hostile to you.)

3. Can you hold an *other's* hand? (You must be willing to hold out your hand to that hostile world and create a bridge, knowing the risks to the *other* and to yourself.)

The ultimate engagement is to embody these questions and live the standards they represent. In a context where race-based inequities are commonly accepted and were embedded in law until 40 years ago, the challenge presents itself every day. When asked how she was able to work with a person who is in constant opposition to progressive, unifying goals, one board member replied, "*I just think to myself, 'Somebody loves this person. It's my job to find out why.'*"

These relationships demonstrate working from a spiritual imperative. They reflect a deep quality of trust grown from knowledge, compassion, common experiences, shared understanding and faith. When physical safety and basic financial well-being are at risk, this is the infrastructure that sustains.

Why is this important to philanthropy?

- Philanthropy that aims to close gaps and make progress toward social justice requires a profound understanding of the environment in which grants are made. An analysis can make a difference that takes into account the legacy of race-based inequities embedded both in law and social practices.

- Designing initiatives to recognize and nurture the infrastructure of relationships that sustain depressed communities can promote sustainability and increase programmatic impact.

- Providing technical assistance to African American organizations that go beyond typical leadership development to include a focus on consciousness itself as it relates to organizational development. (See www.landmarkforum.com and www.hsdinstitute.org)

- Evaluation strategies, tempered by the lived experience, can generate opportunities to reflect upon the nature and quality of relationships and the transformative role they play in moving toward social justice.