

Is Your Foundation Leveraging the Power of Differences?

Discussion Guide and Assessment Tool



Addressing the complex problems of a changing world under the pressure of growing competition for limited funds, today's foundation needs all the creative mind-power it can harness. Research shows that embracing differences and breaking down barriers that keep people from using their full range of talents and skills can stimulate innovation and growth by improving organizational problem-solving and decision-making.

Based on extensive research and experience emerging from its *Transforming Michigan Philanthropy* (TMP) initiative, the Council of Michigan Foundations (CMF) has developed this discussion and assessment tool to help foundation leaders begin essential conversations about the power of differences and determine the level of their organization's readiness for growth.



DISCUSSION GUIDE SUGGESTIONS FOR USE

1. Distribute copies (without the assessment tool) to all stakeholders, asking them to read and prepare to discuss its content in an organization-wide “Conversation about the Power of Differences.”
2. Schedule a block of uninterrupted time for the conversation, and make it clear that all stakeholders are expected to attend and participate.
3. If possible, bring in a professional facilitator experienced in leading discussions on difficult issues.
4. At the start of the conversation, create a safe environment for honest and open discussion by establishing, and asking all participants to agree to, some basic ground rules like:
 - Listen to understand; speak to be understood.
 - Consider new ideas and different perspectives.
 - Fully participate; every voice heard.
5. Encourage participation by all with directed, open-ended questions (“Jesse, did those research findings surprise you?”; “Alysse, what did you think about the story under ‘What it looks like?’”).
6. Facilitate interaction among participants by asking for responses to individual viewpoints (“Is that how you saw it?”; “What does everyone else think?”).

ASSESSMENT TOOL SUGGESTIONS FOR USE

1. After reviewing the discussion guide as a group, have each stakeholder complete the assessment tool anonymously.
2. Compile the findings for a candid picture of your organization’s current culture with regard to understanding of, commitment to, and conditions and resources for harnessing the power of differences.
3. Visit the CMF website at www.michiganfoundations.org to identify Learning Service programs and other reports, discussion guides, and tools that can help your organization move forward.



Discussion Guide

Is our foundation leveraging the power of differences? Let's talk.

Research shows that organizations that recognize and use the power of differences (in everything from race, age, ethnicity, and gender to education, socioeconomics, personality type, and thinking style) generally outperform those that don't.

As part of ensuring that we are doing all we can to continuously improve our performance as a foundation, we want to discuss how we view and approach differences as an organization. The goal is to think about the degree to which we understand, commit to, and provide the conditions and resources for leveraging the power of differences.

Please read the following discussion guide thoroughly and thoughtfully. Take notes on your questions, thoughts, and ideas, and be prepared to share. Be as open and honest as you can.

1. Understanding

Our organization values differences.

Why it matters

In *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*, University of Michigan economist Scott Page presents research proving that groups of people representing different backgrounds, genders, cultures, and thinking styles are better than homogeneous groups at solving problems. This finding has huge implications for organizations like ours, where creative problem-solving is essential if we are to continue to meet the changing needs of the people we serve.

A recent study featured in *The Harvard Business Review* found that leaders who create inclusive environments where different voices are welcomed and engaged were nearly twice as likely as others to achieve “value-driving insights.” Employees in those environments were “3.5 times as likely to contribute their full innovative potential.”

What it looks like

A few years ago Grand Rapids Community Foundation (GRCF) embarked on a major review of its policies and procedures, using an “intercultural” lens. The work inspired an internal grassroots movement affectionately known as the “Culture Club.” Formed by GRCF staff members as a way to infuse some relevant entertainment into the arduous policies and procedures review, club members researched and developed presentations on the customs, holidays, and cuisines of different world cultures. In the intervening years, GRCF has become increasingly intentional about including different voices. For example, the foundation recently hosted a series of estate-planning workshops for LGBT couples and individuals to help them gain a greater understanding of the unique challenges they might face. As a result, “We’re opening up new pipelines of potential donors who now respect the work of our community foundation because we show that respect back to them,” says Development Vice President Marilyn Zack. “And this is just one example of a group that has typically not been engaged when it comes to organized philanthropy.”

How to talk about it

- Do we all believe that our work benefits from the varied experiences and perspectives of our staff, board, advisors, and partners?
- Do we actively solicit and act on different perspectives based on our belief?
- Is that belief reflected in our strategic initiatives?

2. Commitment

Our organization is committed to ensuring and sustaining differences.

Why it matters

In *Learning Together: The Peer Action Learning Network for Diversity and Inclusion*, several Michigan foundations shared their experiences with leveraging the power of differences. All of them stressed the importance of demonstrating a deep commitment to the value of seeking out and incorporating a variety of viewpoints at all levels of the organization—but especially among leadership.

A study affirming that senior leadership commitment is essential to leveraging the power of differences found that in the most successful organizations, managers are trained to recognize and avoid “micro-inequities” and executive leadership is held accountable for modeling and enforcing inclusive practices. These organizations also explicitly included language about seeking and respecting differences in their value statements.

What it looks like

At the Kalamazoo Community Foundation, senior executives lead regularly scheduled “lunch and learn” meetings where staff share stories about their efforts to be more inclusive in order to address “the inequalities that threaten the well-being of our community.” Participation is voluntary, but CEO Carrie Pickett-Erway reports that the sessions are invariably well attended. “It’s really important for us to share how it’s going and how we can do it even better. The safe place that it takes for us to have that conversation has been built carefully and intentionally.”

How to talk about it

- When it comes to valuing differences, does our leadership “walk the talk?”
- Are decision-makers held accountable for soliciting and including a variety of viewpoints?
- Does it feel “safe” to talk honestly about differences here?

3. Conditions

Our organization operates in ways that express our commitment to valuing and promoting differences.

Why it matters

In *Us + Them*, author and Harvard lecturer Tod Pittinsky contends that differences are more likely to have positive impacts on performance within the context of positive attitudes and emotions. In other words, organizations need to create conditions in which differences are not ignored or treated as obstacles to moving forward, but are recognized and celebrated as occasions for learning and growth.

Researchers have found that successful organizations view differences as opportunities for people to learn from each other. They also note that it is essential for organizations to implement policies and practices that support a culture of mutual learning and cooperation.

What it looks like

At the Skillman Foundation, senior management recently restructured the executive team to ensure that it encourages different ideas as well as different ways of thinking about ideas. Realizing that the tenor of the foundation made it “not an inviting environment in which to express conservative views,” and that the leadership team was heavily weighted toward people who were “very driven, very ambitious, and very quick thinkers,” CEO Tonya Allen has added to the mix people who represent different political views and personality types. “It broadens our leadership team so that we have a different level of engagement and contribution and investment from different voices in the conversation,” she says. “We’ll develop better strategies because of it.”

How to talk about it

- Do we tend to view differences as problems or as opportunities?
- As individuals, are we likely to speak up when we witness or experience bias?
- Do we see disagreement as something we can handle and learn from?

4. Resources

We have allocated sufficient time and money to creating and sustaining an organizational culture that values differences and fosters inclusion.

Why it matters

Research supports the assumption that organizations that invest resources to take advantage of the benefits difference offers will outperform those that don't.

One study found that organizations with established practices for promoting the inclusion of a variety of perspectives collectively generated 18 percent greater productivity than the overall U.S. economy. Training and education to learn about others' values, improve cross-cultural communication, and develop leadership skills were found to have a key impact on effectiveness.

What it looks like

At the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, all new employees complete an intercultural competence assessment and receive individualized coaching to create their own intercultural development plans. CEO La June Montgomery Tabron sees the program as an investment in the future, "helping people gain more awareness and then finding practical applications for that awareness. It helps people think on a daily basis about how they respond to differences and how they could make a decision to do something different, to make a better choice."

How to talk about it

- Does everyone here have opportunities for education and professional development?
- Do we invest in programs that promote inclusiveness in the community?
- Are we devoting adequate resources toward recruiting for differences?



Assessment Tool

Is our foundation leveraging the power of differences? Let's assess.

Research shows that organizations that recognize and use the power of differences (in everything from race, age, ethnicity, and gender to education, socioeconomics, personality type, and thinking style) generally outperform those that don't.

As part of ensuring that we are doing all we can to continuously improve our performance as a foundation, we want to assess how we view and approach differences as an organization. The goal is to think about the degree to which we understand, commit to, and provide the conditions and resources for leveraging the power of differences.

For each statement below, please indicate whether you think our organization, as a whole, is "exploring," "making progress," or "getting close." There are no right or wrong answers; we're looking for an accurate snapshot of our foundation as it operates today.

Visit the Council of Michigan Foundations' website at www.michiganfoundations.org to identify resources and programs to support your efforts to leverage the power of differences.

	Exploring. <i>(Haven't decided)</i>	Making Progress. <i>(Somewhat true)</i>	We Are There. <i>(True)</i>
Understanding Our organization values differences.			
• There is organization-wide understanding that our work benefits from the varied experiences and perspectives of our staff, board, advisors, and partners.			
• We believe that hearing and acting on a broad range of ideas contributes to effective problem-solving and decision-making.			
• Our goals and strategies reflect our belief in the value of differences.			
• Our culture of inclusion ensures that different perspectives are actively solicited and considered, not just tolerated.			
• Our grant-making is more effective because it comes from a culture of inclusion.			

Commitment Our organization is committed to ensuring and sustaining differences.

• Our organization's mission, vision, and value statements clearly communicate our commitment to include different cultures, abilities, and perspectives.			
• Our senior executives serve as role models for inclusion and ensure that accountability systems are implemented.			
• Board membership reflects the demographic makeup of the communities we serve or is supplemented by advisors from those communities.			
• Everyone in our organization is expected to contribute to our culture of inclusion and is held accountable for treating others with dignity and respect.			
• We seek feedback regarding behaviors or language that might interfere with our relationships with each other and with the communities we serve. When there are issues, we act on them.			

Conditions Our organization operates in ways that express our commitment to valuing and promoting differences.

• Policies and procedures are clearly aligned in support of inclusion.			
• People here are genuinely curious about cultures outside their own.			
• Everyone feels safe expressing his or her perspectives and identities at work.			
• We recognize that conflict is inevitable and have training and procedures for resolving it.			
• We call out stereotyping or bias and help each other recognize and change these behaviors.			

Resources We have allocated sufficient time and money to creating and sustaining an organizational culture that values differences and fosters inclusion.

• We actively recruit for differences, using established best practices.			
• We have established goals to achieve a workplace that is representative of the community we serve.			
• We invest in mentoring and professional development for all employees.			
• We offer opportunities for management and staff to learn about the power of differences and improve intercultural understanding.			
• We initiate programs that support inclusiveness in the community.			

Sources and Resources

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