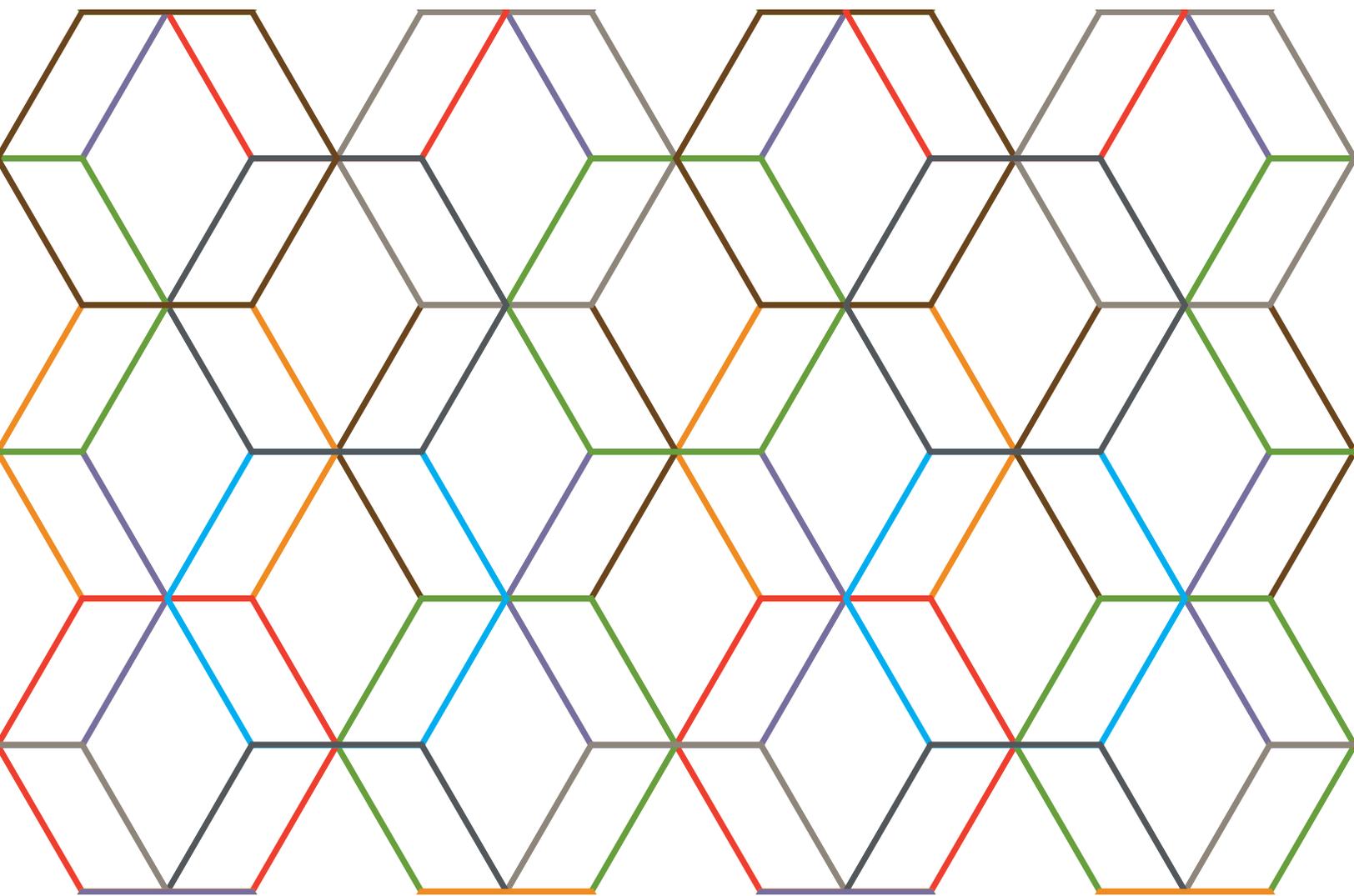


DEI LEARNING SERIES  
FUNDER GUIDANCE  
FOR ENGAGING  
GRANTEES ON DEI



FORD  
FOUNDATION

AT THE FORD FOUNDATION, we believe a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is critical to the success of any social justice organization. With that in mind, we are intentionally creating spaces and developing tools that encourage program officers to reflect on and hone practices related to DEI issues in their grant making. In a series of conversations facilitated by Ford’s Office of Strategy and Learning (OSL), we heard from many program officers who had navigated challenging situations in principled and thoughtful ways, and yet they still expressed uncertainty that they were “doing it right.” We realized that capturing some of their lessons learned—as well as their adept and principled approaches to addressing these issues—could help others as they face similar challenges.

Drawing upon their collective wisdom and experience, this document is intended to offer guidance to funders addressing DEI challenges with grantees. It remains a work in progress and will continue to be refined and shaped on the basis of input from program staff. We offer it here to other funders and invite the philanthropic community to think through the processes and policies that guide engagement with grantees, including when serious allegations arise.

# GUIDING PRINCIPLES

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**WE UNDERSTAND** that building an organizational culture around DEI is an ongoing process. Sharing what we learn along the way is a priority for us.

**AT A FUNDAMENTAL LEVEL**, we want to prevent harm from happening and redress harm when it occurs. We want grantees to know we are serious about seeing them through a challenging situation, so long as they are serious about learning and changing. Our intention, when possible, is to stand by an organization when they are dealing with issues of misconduct, as they take responsibility and improve.

**WE BELIEVE IN RESTORATIVE JUSTICE**, and embrace that approach when appropriate. Our support will always center those who are most negatively affected by discrimination and misconduct.

**AS A FOUNDATION**, we have made the decision that our funds may be used as payment to someone who has been wronged by harassment or discrimination. This is because we believe that the person who was wronged should not be denied support—and our expectation is that the organization in question will take steps to prevent such a situation from happening again.

# BEST PRACTICES FOR GRANT MAKERS

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## AT THE START OF A RELATIONSHIP

**Make DEI values and principles part of your first conversations.**

Be clear and transparent about why you care about DEI and how the organization approaches it: This is an area of great importance and significance, and is therefore essential to conversations about the work and the field.

**Ask questions.**

Get an understanding of how the organization views DEI and incorporates these values into its work and organization. Be explicit that you view building an organization around DEI values as an ongoing process, not something that will be achieved at a particular moment in time and endure without attentiveness and effort.

**Be aware of what is universal and what is contextual.**

How you think about diversity will depend on the geographic region you're working in. Who is marginalized and how that manifests looks different in different contexts. But marginalization itself is universal and social exclusion is relevant everywhere. You want to engage organizations to identify what those patterns look like in their regional context and in their organization and support them to counter those.

**Request data that can help you understand where the organization is now, and where it wants to be.**

Asking for data that captures diversity at different levels of the organization is a good way to begin a concrete conversation and gather information that will allow you to track change over time. Be aware of cultural and legal factors that affect what can be collected. Ask if the leadership of the organization is content with the current status and, if not, what they are aiming to change. Note: You cannot and should not encourage grantees to adopt any practices that would exclude anyone of a certain race, gender, disability, etc. And you should not encourage any kind of quotas—for example, telling an organization, “Twenty-five percent of your staff should be from an historically excluded group.”

**Ask how the organization thinks about equity and inclusion.**

It is not enough to have a diverse staff or board if there is high turnover or greater dissatisfaction for those members of the organization. How does the organization proactively promote equity and inclusivity in their work internally and externally? Does the organization have specific policies that take equity into mind? What have they done to promote inclusivity? How do they handle issues that are raised and instances of whistleblowing? Seek concrete tactical answers to these questions.

**If you have concerns, raise them.**

Raising issues can be uncomfortable and hard to do. But this is essential if organizations are going to become more diverse, equitable, and inclusive. Don't shy away from raising questions, but seek to do so in a way that feels constructive and makes clear that we are there to provide support where we can.

**Then pay attention to the response.**

Does the leadership understand the concerns that have been raised, and do they seem willing to address them in a concrete way? Are they able to say clearly what change will look like? Or are they uncertain about what steps to take? If so, this may be a place where we can help the organization move past obstacles either by connecting the organization to others who have successfully embraced DEI or by providing support to hire an expert on these issues.

**Consider making changes if resistance remains.**

Be clear about your concerns and expectations for change. There is plenty of evidence of the positive effects of embracing DEI for an organization; share some of that evidence. If the leadership continues to resist over time, you should consider whether the value of supporting this organization exceeds the costs. This is a good moment to seek the advice of peers and leadership.

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## IN AN ONGOING RELATIONSHIP

**Cultivate multiple points of contact, at different levels of the organization.**

This will help you get a fuller picture of the culture of the organization, as we cannot assume that any one contact or level of the organization speaks on behalf of the full organization. It also creates channels for people to reach out if a problem arises.

**Use site visits to build relationships and observe.**

Keep DEI in mind when doing site visits. Be sure to spend time with people who are not in leadership positions. What do these interactions tell you about how different voices within the organization are valued? Who is invited to meetings? Who talks? Who is interrupted?

**Document commitments to DEI.**

If an organization has committed to specific goals and benchmarks, make

sure these are documented and shared among you all. Develop a shared understanding of how they will assess and communicate progress. Agree on regular points when you can check in on that progress.

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**Let grantees know they can turn to you for advice, and be constructive in providing it.**

If an organization is having a hard time making changes, help them think through the options and identify what is holding them back. You can ask them: What resources, tools, or people could help you address these obstacles?

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## **RESPONDING TO ACCUSATIONS OF DISCRIMINATION, HARASSMENT, OR OTHER MISCONDUCT**

**Understand your role as a funder.**

Funders are not investigators or judges. We should not try to mediate between the accuser and the accused. We are not legal advisers, nor should we try to be. We're also not on the organization's board, which is ultimately responsible for human resources or reputational issues. We can agree or disagree with their approach—and let them know what we think—but it is up to the organization to respond. This does not mean, however, that we don't want to understand the allegations and ensure the organization is responding appropriately.

**Ask questions.**

Make sure you have a clear understanding of the situation, to the degree that privacy considerations allow. What happened? What issues are at play? How has the grantee responded so far? What are their next steps? What supports does the grantee need to respond? Ask open-ended questions, and try to withhold judgment. When possible, speak in person, and take notes. If the answers seem vague but important to understand, ask more questions.

**Know what you don't know.**

Don't assume you have a thorough understanding of the context based on what you have heard; the information that comes to funders is often not the full story. It is less important that we know all the facts, and more important that organizational leadership is fully aware and taking steps to rectify any problems. We are not in a position to advise on issues of harassment and discrimination; laws vary significantly across states and countries and our job is to encourage organizations to ensure they are fully compliant.

**Assess the immediate and potential impact.**

Is the organization's reputation in its field affected? Can it still advance organizational goals and the core work supported by the foundation? How have others in the organization been impacted by the situation, or experienced other forms of discrimination or harassment?

**Explore dynamics of responsibility.**

How does the grantee see its responsibility to those accused of wrongdoing, those who say they were wronged, and to the organization as a whole? Listen to the language the grantee is using to better understand how they are perceiving, framing, and addressing the issue. If they seem prematurely dismissive or unable to take allegations seriously, be frank about your concerns. Consider, too, how this situation might speak to broader or more systemic issues in the organization or the field. Is the grantee interested in strengthening their ability to prevent and respond to these kinds of problems?

**Align with your colleagues.**

If several colleagues are taking part in conversations and involved in decision making, align your messages and questions in advance. Debrief afterward to make sure you have a shared understanding of where things stand, and how to move forward.

**Be clear, open, and helpful.**

Overall, it's important to be supportive and clear about expectations, and to keep an open line of communication. While a funder should not be a grantee's primary adviser, you can connect them to tools, advice, and expertise to help them weather the storm.

**Consider your next steps.**

Think about how you might assess how effectively a grantee is implementing and internalizing any new policies or procedures and integrating them into their overall organizational culture. Also consider how you might respond if the grantee does not follow through on its plan of action.

**Be direct about your concerns.**

Because you can decide whether or not to fund the organization, you have meaningful influence. If a grantee's response to DEI issues conflicts with your values or policies, tell them about your concerns. If your confidence in the organization's leadership is shaken, you might decide to reach out to the organization's board. If that confidence is not eventually restored, it is time to consider whether funding should end.

# DEI CONSIDERATIONS IN PROCESS AND POLICY

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While conversations about DEI should be part of a program officer's regular interactions with grantees, it is important to ensure that there are defined moments during the grant-making process when data, reflections, and progress toward DEI goals are captured for the institutional record. This will help track grantees' DEI efforts and any changes that occur over time. It can also help create institutional memory that goes beyond any one program officer's tenure and support learning about what is working—or not working—over time.

### HERE'S WHAT THAT LOOKS LIKE AT THE FORD FOUNDATION

As part of the proposal process, Ford asks for data on the demographic makeup of the organization's leadership (for more on this, see "Making It Count: The Evolution of the Ford Foundation's Diversity Data Collection"). We also ask organizations to describe their efforts to promote DEI, any specific goals related to DEI, and how they track progress against those goals.

As part of the grant approval process, program officers write a brief analysis of a potential grantee's organizational health and capacity. This provides an opportunity to reflect on how committed the organization is to DEI in both policy and practice, based on the program officer's impressions and the organization's own analysis.

As part of the grant reporting process, grantees are asked to describe any progress made against DEI-related goals laid out in the proposal form, and to explain any changes to their goals—or what they will do differently, based on lessons learned during the reporting period. This is intended to create an accountability and learning loop for both the grantee and the program officer, and keep the conversation about DEI going throughout our relationship with a grantee.

### WHEN SERIOUS ALLEGATIONS ARISE

Ford's Office of Legal Services has clear guidelines for staff members who learn about credible allegations of sexual misconduct, discrimination, or other conduct that might raise questions about our continuing to work with an individual or organization. These outline who within the foundation a staff member should report the allegations to, and who they should work with to determine an appropriate response. The foundation also has a robust whistleblower policy governing the receipt, retention and treatment of

complaints or concerns, including confidential and anonymous submissions, from employees, grantees and others.

While the foundation cannot be the fact finder in an investigation, we will make sure to the extent that we can that the organization is handling the investigation in a proactive, fair and expeditious manner—and in compliance with the organization's policies and the law.

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### FOR FUNDERS TO CONSIDER

Funders can (and should) play an important role in supporting organizations to advance DEI principles—but it won't happen without intentionality and attentiveness. This requires coming up with a proactive plan for engagement, developing guidelines, determining when and how to track progress, and following up—even when these discussions are uncomfortable. Not doing so can easily lead to an acceptance of the status quo, and that, by its very definition, is something funders work to shift.

The Ford Foundation Office of Strategy and Learning helps program teams develop empirically grounded strategies to reduce inequality and to build evidence for how social change for good happens. We aim to share what we're learning with others in philanthropy and the social justice sector at large. Read more about what the foundation is learning at [fordfoundation.org/learning](https://fordfoundation.org/learning)

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