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From the Mouths of Funders and Nonprofits: 20 Ways to Build Better Relationships

By: Henry Berman and Jennifer Chandler

Last week, we held two Great Funder-Nonprofit Relationships programs in partnership with [Exponent Philanthropy](#), generously supported by the [Fund for Shared Insight](#). More than 200 total participants, representing both funders and nonprofits, joined us for candid conversations in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

What does a great funder-nonprofit relationship look and feel like?

We asked this question during the program and gathered 30 responses that summed up the participants' collective vision:

- Open
- Honest
- Comfortable
- Transparent
- Trusting
- Authentic
- Informative
- Aligned
- Transforming
- Personal
- Responsive
- Flexible
- Two-way
- Accountable
- Thoughtful
- Realistic
- Accepting
- Humanistic
- Evolving
- Intentional
- Strategic
- Rewarding
- Mutually beneficial
- Sustainable
- Curious
- Inspirational
- Patient
- Collaborative
- Relaxed not rushed
- Fun!

As a funder or a nonprofit, we think you'll agree that these characteristics contribute to true partnerships. We've purposely not indicated if each came from a funder or a nonprofit because we found that both groups expressed interest in building relationships with the other that reflect these qualities.

How do we make these characteristics a reality? How do we move from transactional to transformational relationships?

From participants, here are 20 ways funders and nonprofits can work together, starting today, to be more intentional about building relationships with our mission partners:

- Share mistakes
- Get to know each other like I know my friends
- Engage each other with radical candor
- Be less defensive and open to bigger pictures beyond individual programs
- Take risks
- Be strategic
- Listen
- Learn
- Be open to multiyear funding
- Be human-centered in how we design our work
- Connect each other to resources
- Be intentionally educational
- Have open communication
- Be interactive and feedback-friendly
- Adapt to change
- Don't always be rushed; take time to be relaxed
- Engage for the longer term
- Build on common interests
- Keep each other informed
- Be easy-going

Do you agree? We look forward to hearing your responses and sharing more of what we are learning about building and maintaining great funder-nonprofit relationships.

Henry Berman became Exponent Philanthropy's CEO in 2011, previously serving as acting CEO, board member, and committee member. Through his experience as a foundation co-trustee and Exponent Philanthropy member since 2003, he brings a firsthand understanding of the needs of grantmakers to his role. Henry is a board member of the National Council of Nonprofits.

Jennifer Chandler is Vice President of the National Council of Nonprofits and has served as a consultant, legal advisor, and board member for charitable nonprofits, as well as a trustee of a private foundation.