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PERSONAL STRATEGY

MOBILIZING YOUR SELF FOR EFFECTIVE GRANT MAKING

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personal strategy

mobilizing your self for effective grant making

"My heart sank at that meeting. I could tell that he felt this was hurdle-jumping — and unnecessary and undignified."

— A grant maker recalling the moment when negotiations with a grant seeker seemed to get off track

"I often feel uncomfortable about saying No to applicants. How do I know this proposal isn't going to work? Am I missing something important?"

— A grant maker reflecting on how the familiar task of declining grant seekers becomes confusing and burdensome

"The soft things are hard."

— A veteran grant maker explaining that the toughest challenges of the job come in managing relationships

GrantCraft was created to find and share knowledge about the craft of grant making held by many people in many kinds of giving organizations. Through hundreds of interviews, the GrantCraft team has uncovered enormous expertise, much of which is now offered in our guides.

We have also discovered some common concerns that trouble even the most effective grant makers. As the grant makers quoted here suggest, there is something hard about the soft challenges of grant making – the part of a grant maker's work that lies beyond the reach of technical tools.

Some people described discomfort in "dealing with the power imbalance" between themselves and those who come to them seeking money. Others talked about the struggle to integrate more of themselves into their work. Some reported feeling torn between navigating requests from the communities or fields they support and advocating inside their own foundations.

This guide deals with those challenges by looking at them through what we call a "role lens." The concept of role has received attention from scholars in several disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and organizational studies. The guide is based on GrantCraft workshops in which participants from family, private, community, and corporate foundations adjusted the conceptual scaffolding of role to fit grant-making contexts.

Most of us come to grant making because we want to make a difference. We focus on understanding the community or field we hope to support, not understanding our own role. We have little sense of the grant making terrain and where its fault lines and sand traps might be — until we fall into them.

Every grant maker faces situations that resist technical solutions, moments when there's right on both sides and it's hard to know how to move things forward. This guide was written for those moments.

project leader, GrantCraft

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This guide was written by William Ryan and Jan Jaffe. It is part of the GrantCraft series.

Underwriting for this guide was provided by the Ford Foundation.

Publications and videos in this series are not meant to give instructions or prescribe solutions; rather, they are intended to spark ideas, stimulate discussion, and suggest possibilities. Comments about this guide or other GrantCraft materials may be sent to Jan Jaffe, project leader, at j.jaffe@grantcraft.org.

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Personal Strategy and Why It Matters

Like the foundations they work for and the nonprofits they fund, most grant makers believe that good grant making requires effective strategy. When it comes to their own way of working, however, many have neither an explicit strategy for effectiveness nor any support for developing one. Fortunately, grant makers have a variety of tools to help them work through technical problems effectively, from logic models to due-diligence protocols, but most recognize that they frequently encounter situations that demand more.

There is no tool, no one right way, to say No to a long-time grantee or Yes to a risky grant seeker; to confront the director of a floundering project; or to advocate a new idea within a foundation. These tasks take grant makers into what organizational theorist Donald Schön has called the "swampy lowlands" that exist in all fields of practice. Rather than the high ground where they encounter neatly framed problems that can be carefully studied for technical solutions, here in the lowlands they find themselves in ambiguous situations that can merely be managed.

The challenges grant makers find in ambiguous situations are often further compounded by several tensions that come with their jobs. They work for the public good, but in private institutions. They are called on to collaborate with grantees but know that, because of the power imbalance, few grantees are likely to trust them fully. They aim to connect grantees and their foundations but often end up feeling squeezed in the middle. To master these situations and unusual dynamics, grant makers need personal strategies for effectiveness.

In contrast to organizational strategies with multi-year time horizons, personal strategies can help individual grant makers manage a series of near-term situations: conducting a difficult conversation with a grantee; presenting a risky proposal to the board; or giving critical feedback to a grant seeker. And unlike the formal, written strategies of organizations, personal strategies are informal and usually unstated.

In fact, the most effective personal strategies in swampy situations are also the least visible. They're devised quickly, almost intuitively, to respond to a unique situation in real time. That's why the very best grant makers seem like "naturals" who were simply born to the job. They don't seem to have, or need, personal strategies at all. But the fact that the best strategies are often the least visible presents a puzzle: How can grant makers improve their capacity for developing personal strategy unless they have a framework that makes the *process* of developing personal strategy visible?

For this guide, GrantCraft organized a series of workshops in which grant makers from a variety of foundations explored one hypothesis for improving their personal strategies: We proposed that effective grant makers master not only their job but also their role. Their *job* is the sum of discrete tasks that grant makers handle by learning the tools of their trade. Their *role* is a set of broadly defined expectations that come with the job and the discretion grant makers are given to meet them. Role provides grant makers with a framework for understanding and improving their personal strategies for effectiveness.

Reflecting on role might strike harried grant makers as a luxury they can't afford. But both this guide and the workshops that led to it speak directly to a fundamental question that more established fields and professions have grappled with for years: What makes an effective practitioner? It's accepted as a given that being an effective doctor or teacher or trial attorney requires not just knowledge of a profession but also an understanding of the role and the many challenges entailed in taking it up effectively. As patients, students, or clients, we're grateful when practitioners in those fields have reflected on the challenges of mastering those roles and thereby improved their effectiveness within them.

The guide has three sections. The first is a short primer that presents three role-related concepts (borrowed from sociology and social psychology) as elements of personal strategy. The second offers a framework to help grant makers consciously emulate the effective personal strategies we normally associate with "naturals."
The third offers techniques to help grant makers consistently develop good personal strategy.

WHERE THE EXAMPLES COME FROM

To help create this guide, GrantCraft organized workshops through grant maker associations to explore the idea that role can be an important concept for improving grant maker effectiveness. The Council of Michigan Foundations, Northern California Grantmakers, Philanthropy Northwest, and the British Columbia Association of Grantmakers organized member sessions for us. We also held informal gatherings of grant makers in New York and Boston. More than 100 grant makers from independent, community, family, and corporate foundations participated in workshops over an 18-month period.

Each session generated new insights on how the role concept can be applied to grant making and how it can help grant makers develop and manage their own personal strategies for effectiveness. This guide reflects those insights, many of which originated in the lively dialogue and candid reflections of workshop participants. A list of others who contributed to the creation of this guide can be found on page 21.

The Elements of Personal Strategy

For a nonprofit organization, strategic planning usually starts with some variation of the classic "SWOT" technique, in which an organization analyzes its own *strengths* and *weaknesses*, along with *opportunities* and *threats* in its environment, to develop a strategy for advancing its mission. A grant maker's personal strategy may begin in a similar way, with a trio of concepts — role, self, and system — that help analyze personal strengths and weaknesses and consider the larger environment in which the grant maker hopes to be effective.

ROLE

Role can do for individual grant makers what mission does for nonprofit organizations. When they're about to develop a strategy for responding to new opportunities, or when they're hit with a crisis that leaves them reeling, organizations reconnect with their mission to help them focus on their ultimate aims. Although the mission is too sweeping to tell them precisely what to do next, it's pointed enough to help them focus on what's truly important and to develop strategies in light of it.

Role is similar. In contrast to job duties, which can be neatly codified in a job description, the grant maker role has more breadth. It's more like the white space in the job description, or what organizational theorist and consultant Larry Hirschhorn calls "the large zone of discretion" in which "you have to decide how to execute your work." It's what you're expected to do but aren't explicitly told to do in order to advance the work of the foundation. It often calls on grant makers to be learners, analysts, and bridge-builders, students of their community or program area who can assess the fit of a funding opportunity while also connecting grantees to each other, the foundation, and other resources.

Grant maker roles vary across foundations in the same way missions do across organizations. But, more fundamentally, awareness of mission and awareness of role provide the same benefit: focusing people on what's really important, while also giving them enough latitude to respond to the changing environment around them.

SELF

The important question in organizational strategy is not "What should we do to advance our mission?" but rather "What should we do to advance our mission *in light of our own strengths and weaknesses?*" Strategy involves introspection to gain understanding of the organization's culture, people, systems, habits, knowledge, history, and anything that might inspire or rule out a given course of action.

In the same way, grant makers need to determine how to play their role specifically — in light of their personal strengths and weaknesses. They need to explore how their personal assets — skills, life experiences, personality traits, passions, and other strengths — can help them perform their role effectively. Similarly, they have to assess which of their weaknesses — insecurities, blind spots, knowledge gaps, and personal quirks — may interfere with their effectiveness. In the jargon of role specialists, each of us faces the challenge of "bringing our self to our role," leveraging all of our strengths to perform the role effectively — and, in the process, distinctively and authentically.

Just as it's tempting for organizations to choose a strategy because it looks plausible, only to find out later that it has little to do with their actual strengths and weaknesses, it's easy for grant makers to envision playing their role generically. Recalling her experience consulting to grant makers, leadership development consultant Rose Miller says it's not uncommon for grant makers to "fail to authorize themselves" to personalize their role. They play their role in the way they've observed others do it, or as they think they should, with little consideration for how to play in light of their unique personal attributes. They have trouble getting role and self on the same page, as two related parts of a larger story about effectiveness.

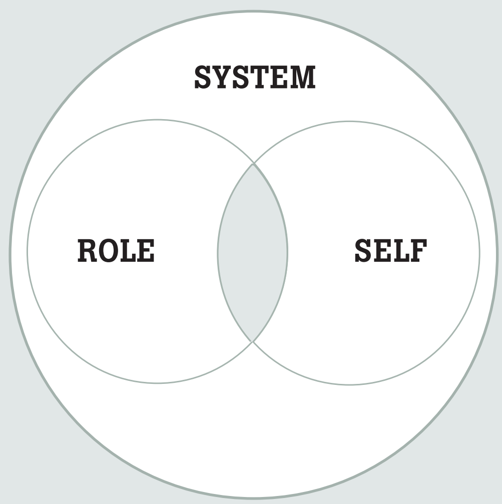
The opposite reaction is also common. Some grant makers actively resist reflecting on role because they fear it will "bureaucratize" them or make them "feel fraudulent." But the opposite is true: Understanding their roles give them a chance to put their distinctive, authentic selves to work. And the more they put their selves in the service of their roles, the more likely they are to be effective.

SYSTEM

Effective organizations need an understanding of how environmental forces – such as public policy, funding opportunities, or social and political trends – pose threats and opportunities. Otherwise, they can't grasp their own situation, much less envision the strategy most likely to advance their mission.

In developing personal strategies, effective grant makers make similar assessments of their environment, although on a different scale. Instead of gauging the effects of public policy or social trends, they consider how other roles (boss, board, grant seeker, grantee, colleague) create distinctive conditions – a sort of grant maker microclimate – around their own spot in the work system. This view of the workplace as a system made up of many interacting roles helps grant makers see who is influencing them, why, and how they can respond.

Specifically, it helps them understand that people act as they do not only because of who they are but also because of the roles they play. This perspective can inform how a grant maker responds, for example, to a grantee who seems reticent to share information. Rather than conclude that the grantee is hiding something, they can see the grantee's reserve in part as a result of the interaction between the grantor and grantee roles. The grantee's spot in the work system, particularly when asking for money, carries considerably



Role	expectations, responsibilities
Self	personality, skills, experience gender, race, ethnicity
System	multiple, interacting roles environmental factors

CFAR, 2005

less power than that of the grant maker. *Anyone* in that spot might reasonably conclude that being too candid or trusting could put their funding at risk. And *anyone* in the grant maker's spot is likely to encounter this feature of the microclimate repeatedly.

In other words, system awareness brings new meaning to the clichéd advice, "Don't take it personally." The more we see that much of what goes on in the workplace is not the product of person-to-person interactions, but of person-in-role to person-in-role interactions, the less prone we are to anxiety – about whether people like us, trust us, value us, and so on. We understand that some dynamics simply come with the work system. Most important, system awareness makes it easier to figure out how to respond to a situation. So, given that grantees are unlikely to trust grant makers easily, what will I need to do in this situation to foster productive collaboration? Used this way, system awareness can help us manage distracting anxiety and develop effective personal strategies.

The work system not only assigns grant makers specific types of work that help them advance the missions of their organizations, it also assigns them a geographic position. Educator and consultant Barry Oshry has put this idea on the organizational-development map by showing how people's position in a work system – as a "top," "middle," or "bottom" – affects their behavior and performance. As middles positioned between their boards or bosses and their grantees, grant makers can feel torn by the pull from two sometimes conflicting "ends" of their work system. In those situations, it's easy to identify too strongly with one side or the other. To be effective in the face of tearing, suggests Oshry, grant makers need both awareness of its dynamics and a determination to focus on the goals embedded in their role. [For more on Oshry's analysis, see "Caught in the Middle," page 16.]

Grant makers who have internalized a strong sense of their role, their self, and their system are constantly devising personal strategies to manage swampy situations — and performing more effectively as a result. They're focusing on what's ultimately important in their work and leveraging their personal strengths in service to their goals, all the while understanding how the system they work in poses distinctive threats and opportunities.

Thinking Like a Natural: A Framework for Personal Strategy

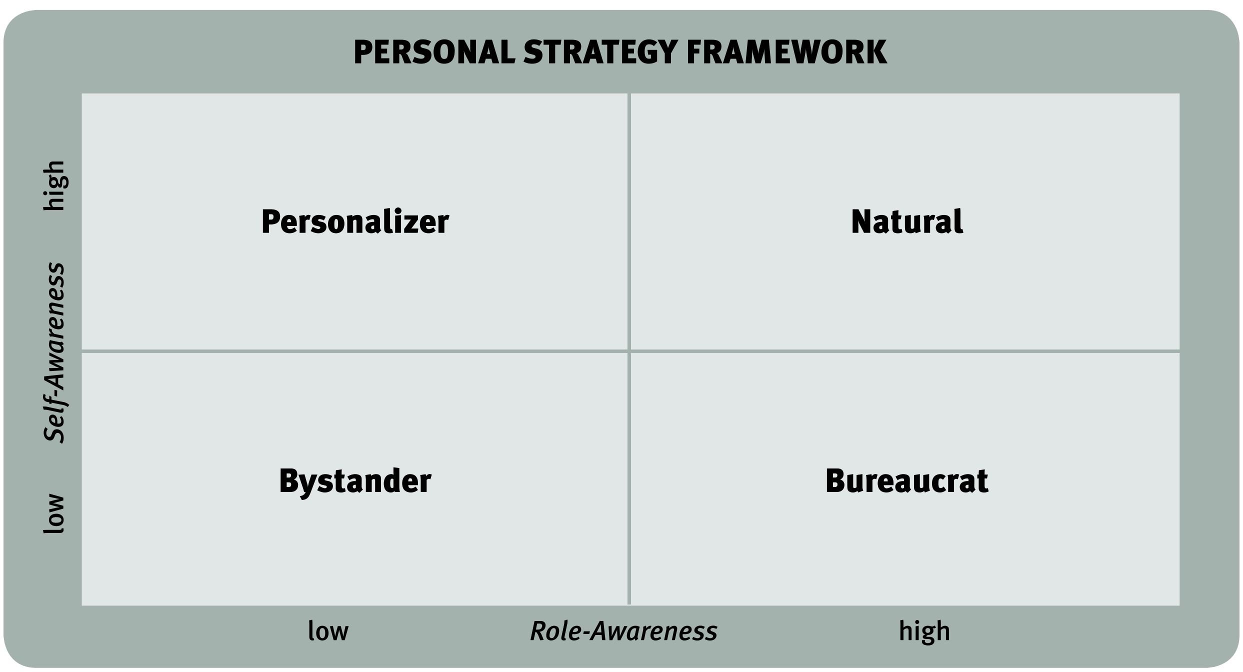
The power of an analytic framework is that it provides a way to understand explicitly things we already do but don't usually reflect on. The framework below is a tool for managing role-awareness and self-awareness and for organizing them into a personal strategy for difficult situations.

Most grant makers have probably found themselves in each of the quadrants in ambiguous situations. When they sustain a high awareness of both self and role, and mobilize self in service of role, they are most likely to perform like ***naturals***, consistently producing good personal strategies. But by focusing more on role than self, or more on self than role, or on neither, grant makers end up with the personal strategies of ***bureaucrats***, ***personalizers***, or ***bystanders***.

A framework like this can be helpful in two ways:

- In real time or prospectively, it can help you focus on what you're aiming for — the benefits that come with being in the high-high quadrant. If you visualize the framework as you're going into or working your way through an ambiguous situation, it can help you get to a good strategy.
- Retrospectively, it can help you look back at your behavior during an ambiguous situation to see why you ended up where you did and what you could have done to perform more like a natural.

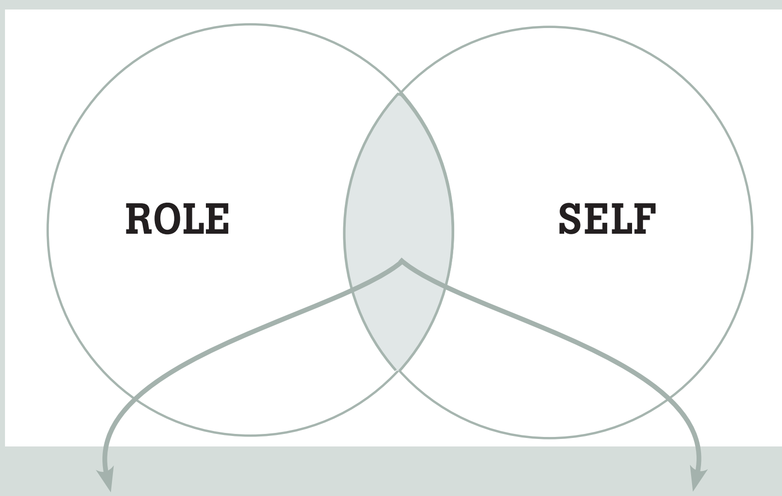
It's important to understand when using the framework that it is a resource for situations when choices are unclear,



stakes are high, and a grant maker's strategy for personal effectiveness can make all the difference. Under those circumstances, there's only one spot to aim for: the high role-awareness and high self-awareness quadrant of the natural.

Using concepts like "role" and "self" to create personal strategy may seem contrived, yet the ability to do so is exactly what we admire in the peers we consider to be naturals. We tend to think of naturals as existing apart from their roles. In reality, the opposite is true: Without a role to play, naturals would have nothing to be naturals *at*.

Naturals are impressive precisely because they have mastered their role, not because they ignore it. They understand where their role fits in the larger work system, what it demands from them, and how to perform it in light of their own talents. Their personal strategies are informed by both high role-awareness and high self-awareness, each of which has its own benefits. Taken together, these benefits increase the chances for devising effective personal strategies. While naturals maintain and harness this dual awareness intuitively, the rest of us can do it deliberately.



Role-Awareness Benefits

Focus – You know what's important in your work, even when you're in confusing or ambiguous situations.

Accountability – Focusing on what's important makes you feel accountable for achieving what's important.

Efficiency – More focus and less confusion mean fewer detours and distractions, or more work accomplished.

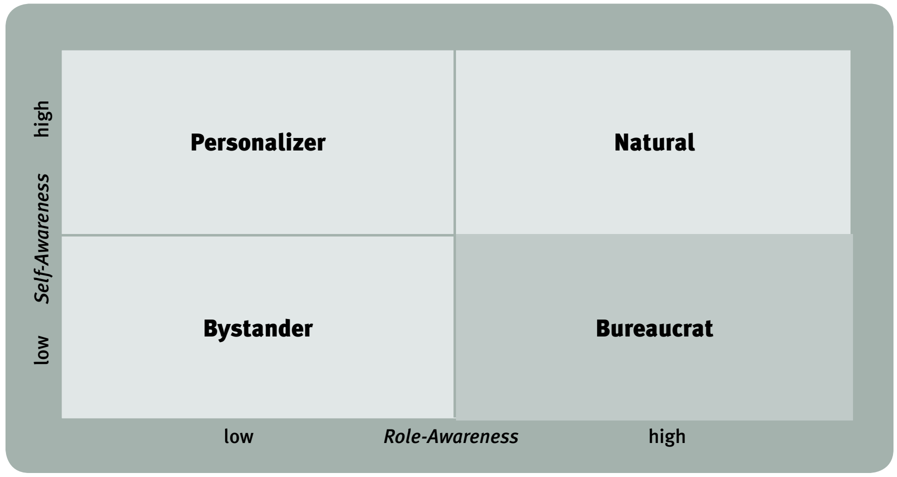
Self-Awareness Benefits

Commitment – Putting your self at the service of your role is committing to what's important.

Collaboration – Commitment itself can engender collaborative work, especially when you also mobilize personal assets — like candor, empathy, or warmth — that make it easier for people to trust you.

Learning – Personal curiosity, passion, and openness — all aspects of self — support learning.

The following scenarios illustrate places where grant makers can get stuck in difficult situations — and when adjusting the balance between role-awareness and self-awareness can lead to more effective personal strategies.

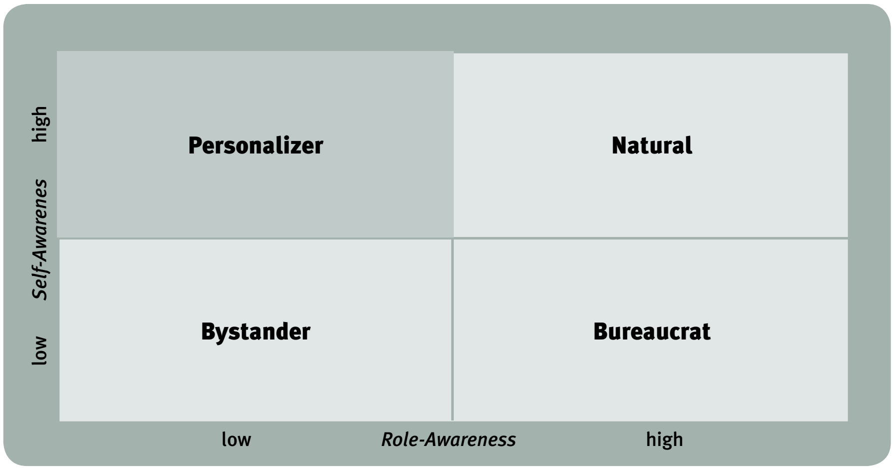


BUREAUCRAT

High role-awareness and low self-awareness lead to the personal strategies of a ***bureaucrat***.

Case in point: A relatively new grant maker at a community foundation finds her first site visits "tricky" on two counts. Even her mildest pleasantries seem to inflate grant seekers' expectations. And she worries that her hosts have over prepared, making it difficult to see beyond the well-rehearsed presentation to the real work of the organization. In response, she develops a guarded approach to site visits, monitoring her own reactions and interactions carefully to ensure that her body language or comments can't be misinterpreted and by giving the grantee a suggested agenda and time limits.

Analysis: This grant maker's site-visit etiquette delivers some benefits of role-awareness: she focuses on and makes herself accountable for observing programs, not socializing with grant seekers. And sticking to task as she does, her site visits are no doubt efficient. But by failing to mobilize her personal warmth, humor, and spontaneous curiosity, she foregoes the opportunity for productive collaboration. Her guarded demeanor probably limits her ability to engage grant seekers in candid, productive give-and-take. Ironically, she may end up learning less — exactly the result she wanted to avoid by choosing her role-focused strategy in the first place. A strategy more firmly rooted in a dual awareness of self and role could make her site visits far more productive.



PERSONALIZER

High self-awareness and low role-awareness produce the strategies of ***personalizers***, grant makers who get distracted by their personal reactions and lose sight of what's ultimately important in a given work situation.

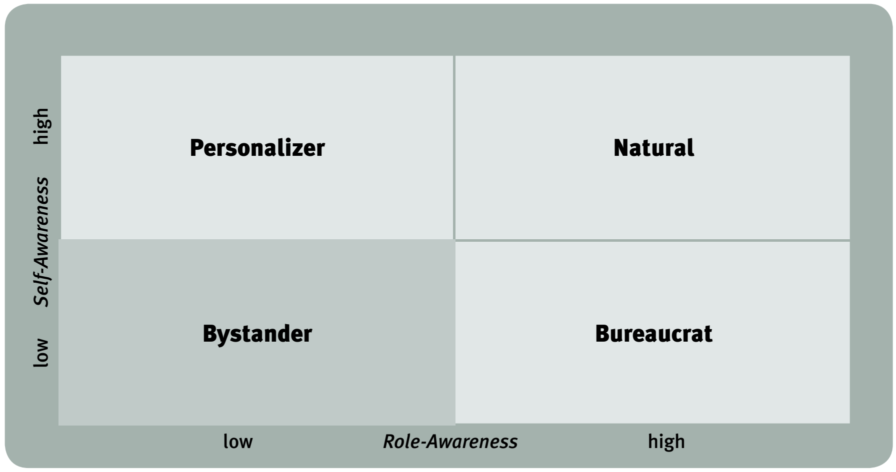
Case in point: A grant maker at a large foundation is personally pained to decline a proposal. She fears being the straw that will break the back of a fragile nonprofit doing important work and finds herself postponing the turn down. Recalling this and similar situations, she explains: "I sometimes find myself acceding in the moment with a smaller grant or asking for revisions in hopes that it will be a better fit because [saying No] makes me feel like a monster."

Analysis: This grant maker brings awareness of self but not of role to a stressful situation. Without the guidance her role offers, she cannot leverage her personal assets constructively. So, instead of mobilizing her compassion to acknowledge the pain she knows her decline inflicts, she lets her compassion pull her off task. By reflecting more thoughtfully on her role in situations like this, she might be better able to anticipate how her weaknesses might unsettle her. Greater awareness, for example, that she tends to feel some discomfort with her own authority might help her maintain her sense of accountability for what is really important. Instead, she ends up personally committed and highly collaborative – hallmarks of high self-awareness – but to the wrong goal.

As participants in our workshops pointed out, low role-awareness can lead to other unproductive behaviors, short of total capitulation, in saying No to grantees. Some grant makers procrastinate because the task stirs up too much anxiety and uncertainty. Others give mixed messages, praising a grant seeker's work while turning them down, thus leaving the grant seeker uncertain about how to improve a proposal.

Some fall prey to a different personalizer problem: grandiosity. The folk wisdom of the field has long recognized the problem and reminded grant makers that people are laughing at their jokes, returning their calls, and seeking out their advice partly because of the role they inhabit. If they lose sight of that dynamic, grant makers can become over confident, less inclined to healthy self-doubt, or blind to weaknesses in their work.

BYSTANDER

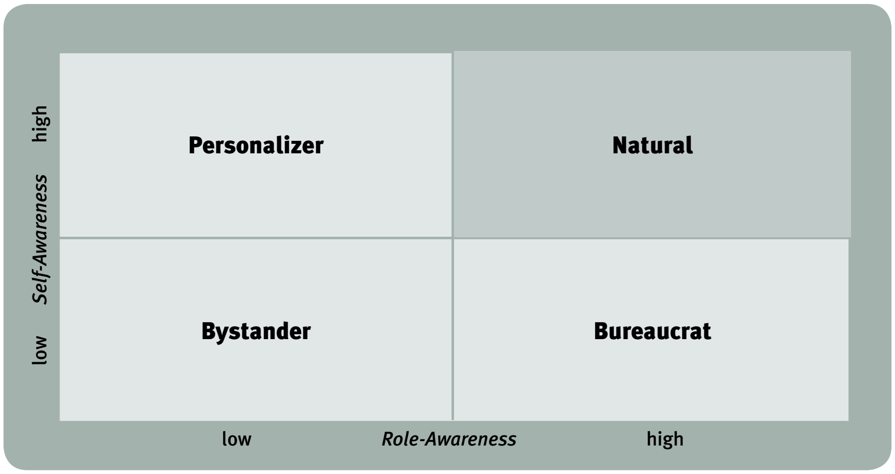


Unlike bureaucrats, who try to get through ambiguous situations by focusing on a narrow definition of role, or personalizers, who try to manage by sheer force of personality, grant makers sometimes behave like ***bystanders***, paying too little attention to either role or self. They convince themselves that they are mere bystanders, not protagonists, in the swampy situation at hand. As a result, they operate with no personal strategy for effectiveness at all, or, as one grant maker put it, in "sleep working" mode.

Case in point: An experienced grant maker at a medium-sized foundation noted a "nagging feeling" about the struggle of a long-time grantee — the founder and executive director of a nonprofit organization — to manage an expansion of his programs. The grant maker opted not to inquire further, even though the organization was important to his foundation and he might have been able to offer valuable assistance in improving its prospects. It wasn't really his place, he reasoned, to open "this Pandora's box."

Analysis: Had he explored his role further, this grant maker would probably have concluded that his foundation expected him not only to administer grants but to be resourceful in supporting grantees. Taking up this broader role, in turn, would have called on him to mobilize his strengths and manage some anxieties. He would have had to try to raise his concerns constructively, put a potentially defensive grantee at ease, and use his "middle" position to broker a course correction that both grantee and foundation could endorse.

Becoming a bystander is not the same as "picking your battles," something all of us do to conserve our energy for the problems that most require our attention. Ideally, we pick our battles after some consideration – perhaps about what our role would require us to do in a given battle; what personal strengths and weaknesses we'd have to manage in order to succeed; and where our time might be better spent. In bystander mode, we simply duck a battle, often because we dread the work or anxiety it might entail.



NATURAL

By combining high role-awareness and high self-awareness, a grant maker can produce the effective personal strategies we associate with the ***natural***.

Case in point: An experienced grant maker, new to her job with a large family foundation, is charged with terminating a multi-year initiative that has provided large grants to a group of long-time grantees. Intellectually, she understands her role: To advance the new strategy, respect the foundation's history of collaboration, and give the grantees plenty of time to plan. Still, she procrastinates.

Looking back, she realizes that she simply dreaded the task at hand. While she was excited about the new initiative, she knew that the current grantees had not anticipated that their program support could end. Her first meetings with them had confirmed her fears. The grantees were profoundly resistant to taking the next steps. Although she understood why, she also found their resistance irresponsible, which triggered a familiar and unconstructive response: "I hate pushing people when I feel they're not doing what they should be doing. I get resentful. In this case, I disguised my resentment by going through the motions. I remember being annoyed and going into neutral."

To her credit, she paused to take stock of her role and the way her personal reactions were undermining her effectiveness. She committed her *self* more actively to the work, using both simple gestures and more complicated skills. She noted aloud that grantees' feelings that the foundation was derailing them might be making collaborative problem-solving difficult: "I know you're not feeling too warm and fuzzy about the foundation right now." She used her own experience as a former executive director to acknowledge the difficulty of the situation. She also recalls "taking a risk" by candidly addressing the group's apparent resistance: "I really feel you don't want to believe this is happening. How can I help you get past it?"

Analysis: Her actions engendered more candor and trust among the grantees, which in turn enabled the grant maker to draw on yet other skills, acquired as a consultant and facilitator. She proposed an intensive transition planning process, bringing the same energy and expertise to the termination of the past program that she would apply to the launch of the new one.

As this scenario shows, even naturals don't always slide intuitively into exactly the right quadrant of the framework. More typically, they do just what this grant maker did: work their way toward an effective personal strategy by analyzing their own reactions and behavior in a swampy situation.

Working Like a Natural: Techniques for Personal Strategy

In a series of GrantCraft workshops, grant makers from a variety of foundations have experimented with a collection of five "reflective practice" techniques designed to help them develop more effective personal strategies. Most left the workshops grateful that they had given themselves the opportunity to pause in their work and explore new techniques for understanding and improving upon their work.

The techniques, described below, can be used by individual grant makers, by foundations as staff development resources, or informally by small groups of grant makers who want to reflect together on how to improve their personal strategies.

1. ANALYZE YOUR FRUSTRATING INCIDENTS.

Frustrating incidents provide good opportunities to reflect on personal strategies that haven't served us well. By taking the time to revisit those incidents, we can better understand weaknesses in our strategies and prepare to address them.

The technique is simple: Choose an incident where you were not satisfied with the outcome and, even with the benefit of hindsight, are not sure how you should have proceeded. Recall what you were trying to accomplish, how you went about it, and what was frustrating. Looking at your recap of the incident, try to identify a turning point – a moment when, if you had responded differently (even if you don't know *how* you should have responded), you might have been more effective.

Now place the incident in the personal strategy framework and start debriefing yourself with the following questions:

- What quadrant was I operating from?
- How did I see my role?
- How did I bring my self – for better and worse — to the role?
- What strengths might have helped?
- What weaknesses should I have guarded against?

With these thoughts in mind, revisit your turning point to see how you might have responded differently. The next time you're approaching a similar situation, you'll have the incident and the lessons you learned from it as resources to help you. (For an example of a frustrating incident analysis, see page 17.)

There are several ways to use frustrating incident analysis. If you're working by yourself, keeping an occasional journal of incidents and analyses can help uncover patterns that suggest new approaches to your role. If your foundation is willing, you and your colleagues can organize meetings to debrief incidents together; those meetings may also suggest ways the organization can help individual grant makers take up their roles. Foundations that use this technique over time can build up a "library" of incidents that can be especially useful for training new employees.

2. CREATE DIALOGUE ABOUT YOUR ROLE.

Organizations depend on us to understand our roles, but we can't always depend on our organizations to clarify our roles for us. That's partly because, by definition, role refers to the autho-

Five "Reflective Practice" Techniques

1. Analyze your frustrating incidents.
2. Create dialogue about your role.
3. Reverse-engineer your role models.
4. Mobilize your self, not your self-image.
5. Plot your partner.

rized *discretion* we're granted with our jobs. Even so, by studying what a foundation has made explicit about the grant maker's role, it's often possible to gain insights that are helpful for devising a personal strategy.

If you look at the duties listed in your job description, for example, what headline or title might best describe them? (Sometimes, when foundations want to underscore a new vision of the grant maker's role, they replace generic titles like "program officer" with more evocative ones like "portfolio manager.") Similarly, if you consider the organization's mission, current strategy, and statement of values, what are the implications for your role? If you're in a large foundation, what does the organizational chart tell you about your spot in the work system? What other roles do you interact with, and how does the work system shape those roles?

Better than doing this on your own, of course, is doing it with colleagues and foundation leadership. The process not only brings more insight into the clarification of roles but also ensures that the roles grant makers take up are actually authorized by the foundation, and not merely the roles they wish they had.

One way to start such a process is by uncovering the implicit mental images people have of the grant maker's role. Completing and comparing simple analogies – "grant maker is to grantee as [blank] is to [blank]" or "grant maker is to our foundation as [blank] is to [blank]" – can generate helpful role images and expose divergent images that may be creating confusion for grantees or conflict within the foundation. Another way to do this is by asking experienced grant makers what metaphors they use to describe their role and inviting staff to look for common themes and patterns.

3. REVERSE-ENGINEER YOUR ROLE MODELS.

Naturally, sometimes unconsciously, we emulate the style and behavior of peers, former colleagues, old bosses – anyone whom we consider effective. It's useful to reflect on our role models explicitly, analyzing *how* they performed their roles effectively, much as engineers analyze a competitor's product to learn how to produce it themselves.

The personal-strategy framework is a good starting point. If one of your role models seems like a natural, try to identify which aspects of her self she was bringing to her role. You might also spot weaknesses (perhaps by thinking about lapses) that she would have been guarding against.

Even a back-of-the-envelope analysis can provide important insights. First, by making explicit what your role models probably do implicitly, you can begin to experiment more consciously with their approaches. Second, you can assess to what extent they really are good role models for you. Perhaps they relied on strengths that you lack, or never mobilized assets that you have in abundance. In other words, choosing and emulating role models without reflection can put you in the position of trying to bring someone else's self, instead of your own, to your role.

4. MOBILIZE YOUR SELF, NOT YOUR SELF-IMAGE.

Sometimes we bring our self-image, rather than our self, to our role. We focus more on how we want to be seen than on how we can best advance the work at hand. And a preoccupation with self-image often creates a boomerang effect, producing the very appearance we dreaded in the first place.

For example, a grant maker may decide that asking too many questions will give the appearance that he's uninformed or unintelligent. Of course, the fewer questions he asks, the less informed and intelligent he is likely to be and to appear. He ends with a double loss – distracted from his role and unable to create the impression he wants.

To monitor how concerns with self-image can undermine effectiveness, make a quick inventory of the two or three "desired" and "dreaded" images that you bring to work situations. Then identify two or three behaviors you typically engage in to advance or deflect each image. The point here is to understand how your preoccupation with a certain self-image affects your work. So, in the example above, the grant maker's goal would be to become less preoccupied with *appearing intelligent.* (And caring about self-image isn't always a bad thing: there are times when wanting to appear a certain way advances actually being that way, as when making an effort to *appear* impartial reinforces a commitment to being impartial.)

In many cases, identifying your desired or dreaded image can help you consider the cost to your work of attempting to maintain that image. You can use the same technique in conjunction with an analysis of a frustrating incident by asking: What image was I attempting to project (or deflect) as I responded to this work situation? Did it lead me to behave in ways that made the situation more difficult? How did those behaviors affect my personal strategy and the eventual outcome of the situation?

5. PLOT YOUR PARTNER.

Bringing an awareness of the personal strategy framework to our interactions with grantees or grant seekers can help us aim for high role- and self-awareness. But it helps to see where our partner in a given interaction is positioned, as well.

You may be operating with high role- and self-awareness, but your partner may be using a bureaucratic strategy that's inhibiting spontaneous problem-solving or brainstorming. Your strategy, therefore, should aim to help your partner bring his self to his own role. You might facilitate that by changing the meeting setting, looking for chances to interact more casually, or sharing your own hopes or anxieties about the project that brings you together.

In the same way, it's useful to know if your partner is using a personalizer's strategy, perhaps distracted by anxiety or blind to new possibilities by too much self-confidence. You might need to refocus on the work at hand, trying to get your partner to work with you to clarify (and thereby commit to working on) the problem or opportunity at hand.

Caught in the Middle

A Conversation with Systems Thinker Barry Oshry

Grant makers often feel they are caught in the middle, pulled between their boards or bosses and their grantees. Since the 1970s, educator and consultant Barry Oshry has organized workshops known as "power labs" to help people understand how position in a work system shapes performance and the overall effectiveness of an organization. Participants in the simulations are randomly assigned to spots in a work system as "tops," "middles," or "bottoms." GrantCraft asked Oshry to reflect on grant makers' position, consider the challenges they might experience, and offer some thoughts on how to be more effective.

Q: *What's life like in the middle of a work system?*

A: In the middle, if you're not confused, you're not paying attention. There is pressure on both sides – for a grant maker, from the grantee and maybe the board. You listen to the grantee; and that makes sense. You listen to the board, and that makes sense. You're being pulled from both sides. Middles have to find a way to reduce this tearing feeling.

Q: *How do they typically respond?*

A: Instinctively, people align with one side or the other. They might resist pressure from below, and just side with the tops. Or on the flip side, they might become advocates of the people below. Either way, it reduces the tearing. Alternatively, if I'm a middle, I might choose to bureaucratize myself. I can make it really difficult for people to deal with me by becoming very inflexible, rigid, with all kinds of rules about the way I work so that people will stay away. Or I can react by trying to be a good person and doing my best to please everyone. But this doesn't resolve the tearing. It only increases it. Both sides look at me and say, "He's weak." I end up experiencing myself as incompetent.

Q: *You argue that people benefit from "seeing systems" – understanding that what they experience at work is partly a function of their spot in the system. What can middles gain from knowing they're middles?*

A: At the very simplest level, it's helpful to know, "It's not just me. It's the role." If you're alone, if it's just you and your issues, the options are really therapy or dealing with it myself personally. But if you see it systematically, that opens up new strategies for how to deal with it. It's not about fixing *me* but about mastering the situation.

Q: *So how do middles master their situation?*

A: They need to get back to the vision of the outcome. The whole process of grant making is about helping people make things happen in the world. It's not about me, or my identification with the foundation, or the grantee. My job is making things happen in the world. Given that, and in the face of tearing, the real question for middles is, "How do I maintain independence of thought and action?"

Q: *What does independence of thought and action look like?*

A: They need to ask, "What do *I* think should happen?" You have to get very clear about your thoughts: "What is this all about? What do I see here?" They end up taking stands on what they see and push back. For example, if a board or a boss says "No," a middle might push back and ask, "Why not?" It has to do with not just being at the whim of the board or boss. That can be a middle's contribution to the organization: to help others see things that they can't see on their own.

Q: *Can organizations do anything to support middles?*

A: Often we approach these situations as if they're all about the middle and the middle's problems. But the ends have some responsibility here, too. Boards could get into conversation about how to make the middle situation better: "How can we support you?" It's almost enough to get the board to understand the middle's dilemma so they can have more empathy.

Q: *If their bosses or boards aren't that empathetic, then what?*

A: Middles often feel alone, not supported by either end. So integration with peers can help. People can trade best practices, provide coaching to each other. Or it can function politically – and this can be threatening to organizations – when they see things they can do to change the system collectively that they cannot change on their own.

For more on the significance of position in a work system, see Barry Oshry, *Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries of Organizational Life (1995*).

In Hindsight: Analyzing a Frustrating Incident

A grant maker from a private foundation walked GrantCraft through a frustrating incident that arose as she introduced her foundation to a prospective grantee with a novel strategy. Reflecting back on her approach, she discovered that operating as a personalizer had ended up frustrating her, the grant seeker, and the goal at hand.

Q: *In hindsight, you felt you got off track right before an important meeting between you, your boss, and two grant seekers who had an idea you really liked. What happened?*

A: When the grant seekers showed up for the meeting, I really started questioning my judgment. Everything that had looked so appealing when I met them in the field seemed off. All I could think was, "What was I thinking?"

Q: *What had looked so great in the field?*

A: I loved their strategy. I thought they were offering fresh ideas in a field that had grown moribund. They knew business, markets, and capital strategies, and they were idealistic and progressive. They wore suits and workboots – literally and figuratively.

Q: *So what was the problem in the office?*

A: That they wore suits and workboots! Our office is pretty mainstream, so they looked out of place. But more important, the strategy seemed out of place, too. On the site visit, I was focused only on them. But when they came into the office, I was thinking about the rest of the foundation's grants in this area, and I just thought, "These guys are really working at the margins of the field. Where is all this heading? How is it going to make a difference? I'm going to end up embarrassed in this meeting." I just had a sinking feeling.

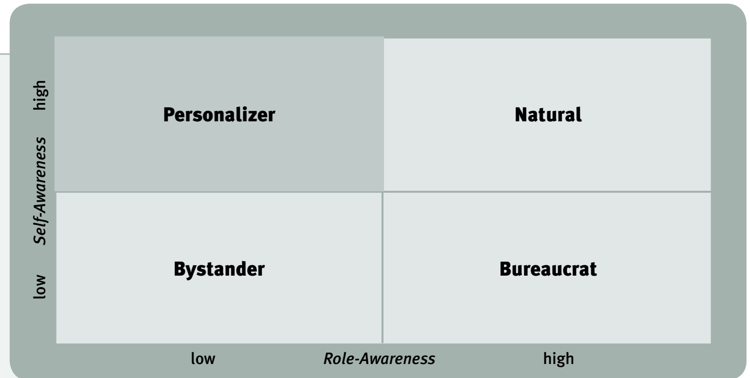
Q: *In terms of the role framework, where were you operating?*

A: Definitely as a personalizer. I lost touch with my role, and the fact that it was my *role* to support ideas and people coming from the margins of the field as well as more mainstream organizations, and got caught up in all this personal anxiety.

Q: *Can you take us through the role framework, showing us what you did, and how you might have responded in a different role stance?*

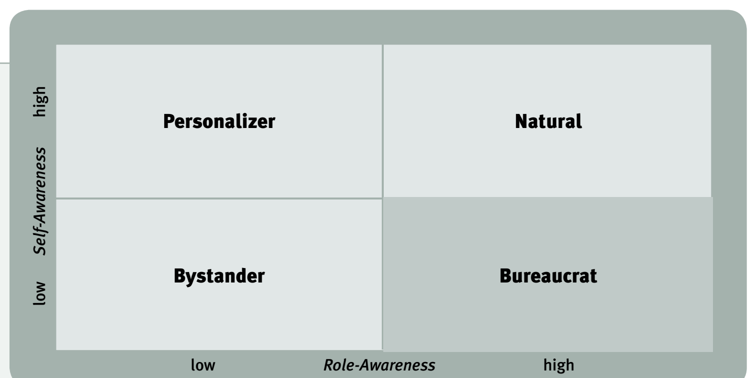
A: Okay. I'll go through the four quadrants.

In all honesty, the **personalizer** quadrant is where I stood at the time. I should have been saying, "How can I help my foundation and the grant seeker figure out whether we could work together? What do I need to bring to the table to make that happen?" But I was really unfocused, making myself and other people anxious.



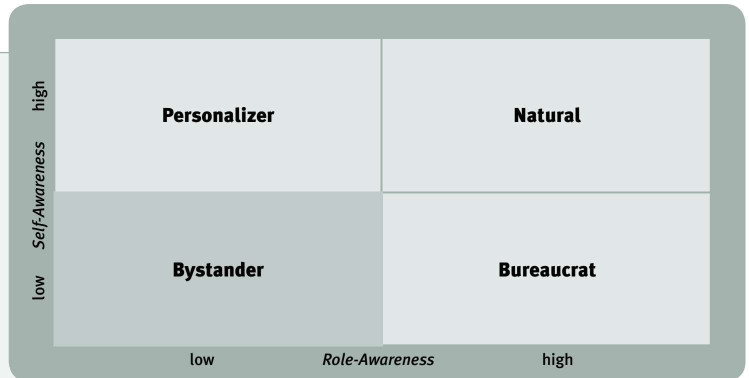
- They made some nervous comment about our fancy office, and I made a lame joke about their "cutting edge fashion." It was friendly banter, but I'm sure it unnerved them.
- Throughout this whole process I had stopped being a bridge-builder, which was really my role. On the site visit, I had let myself totally identify with the grantees and really wasn't thinking about where and how they would fit with the foundation. Back in the office, I started identifying totally with the foundation. Instead of helping the grant seekers adjust to our environment, I just cringed and left them on their own. And instead of helping my boss understand where I thought the fit might be, I just sprang these people on him. It was like I was expecting each of them to do the bridge building alone – and that was my job. My boss did think, especially at first, that their idea was flaky. By losing sight of my role, I got exactly the reaction I didn't want.

If I picture handling it like a **bureaucrat**, I'm leaving behind all the personal baggage that I brought to the meeting, but I'm also leaving the useful parts of my self behind, too. I'm just a grant maker machine, instead of being myself in the grant maker role.



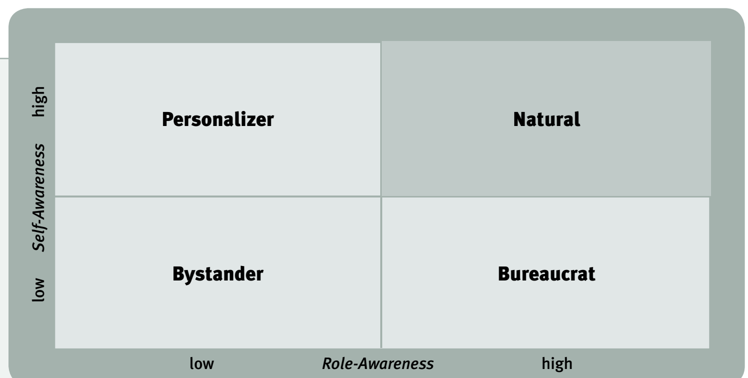
- I would have duly noted that we believe in mutual learning but then not contributed to the learning myself.
- I would have kept it pretty impersonal…definitely no jokes about their clothes. But no jokes at all – no warmth or anything that might have put everyone at ease. It would have been, "We're here to work."
- I would have done what I often did when I was new [as a grant maker] and not sure how to carry myself in a situation, which was to be careful not to say anything or show anything that might have been misconstrued as positive or negative feedback.

Acting as a **bystander**, I would have sensed from the first site visit that introducing this idea and this organization to my foundation would be tricky for me. It might be the right thing to do from a strategy point of view, but I would simply not have risen to the challenge of figuring out how to manage myself in this role.



- I don't think there ever would have been a meeting of my boss and these grant seekers in the first place because to do that would mean accepting that my role required that. I'd just write up the proposal, point out where it differed from the foundation's strategy, and let the board worry about it.

As a **natural**, instead of getting enthusiastic about their strategy and then losing sight of my role as the bridge in this learning, I would have focused much more on the learning role and what I needed to bring to the table to advance that goal.



- I would have tried to pause and get some distance from my anxiety before it undermined the mutual learning goal. I might have realized that my fixation on their clothes was related to the fact that I was worried about springing a surprise on my boss. I hadn't given him a real read on where the organization fit politically or in terms of our other grantees.
- If I had really thought, "Look, my role here is to help my foundation explore this uncharted territory," I might even have said that out loud! And then I might have asked my boss to come on a second site visit with me so we could both get a better chance to get to know them.
- When they came to my office, I would have picked up on how their remarks about the space were as much about their discomfort as a commentary about the foundation, and I would have tried to use humor and warmth to put them at ease so they could focus on our purpose.

Ways to Use This Guide

We hope this guide will inspire grant makers and other foundation practitioners to reflect more deeply on the relationship between organizational effectiveness and personal strategy in their own institutions and elsewhere. The five reflective practice techniques described on pages 13 — 15 may be especially useful as starting points for discussion among board members or executive staff, in peer group sessions, or with groups that cross functions.

The analytic framework on page 7 may be helpful to grant makers as they plan for situations they know might become difficult or look back on ambiguous situations after the fact. A grant maker may also want to use the reflective practice techniques to pair up with a colleague or with a grantee or grant seeker to explore a different way of managing a difficult situation — especially one where both parties were dissatisfied with the outcome.

GrantCraft also offers a workshop based on this guide. See our website at www.grantcraft.org for a list of upcoming workshops or to request information about how to organize a session.

Other Resources

The organizations below offer education, training, and consulting services that are informed by role concepts. All contributed to GrantCraft's workshops on role and this guide:

- **CFAR** (www.cfar.com) — a management consulting firm specializing in strategy and organizational development in the nonprofit and for-profit sectors. CFAR's consulting, publications, and teaching incorporate role concepts as resources for diagnosing and improving organizational performance.
- **Learning as Leadership** (www.learnaslead.com) — a leadership development organization serving the public, non-profit, and for-profit sectors with intensive workshops aimed at helping leaders understand how to bring their selves to their roles more productively. Among their many tools is the "desired and dreaded images" audit included in the techniques section of this guide.
- **The William Alanson White Institute – Organization Program** (www.wawhite.org) — a professional development program that uses role concepts to help participants – including executives managing change, organizational consultants, and human resource professionals – understand how organizational dynamics affect organizational performance.

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