Shifting Relationships with Grantees: Advancing Trust-Based Philanthropy through Emergent Learning

By **Brittney Gaspari** (EL 2020)

*Case
Study*

Context

The Winston-Salem Foundation, founded in 1919, is a community foundation focused on Forsyth County, North Carolina. Until 2016, the Foundation had a history of serving as a responsive grantmaker for any type of projects within the geographic boundary of Forsyth County. The funding typically fell into three categories: capacity-building grants, programmatic grants, and capital campaign grants. The Foundation didn't "have an opinion" on the most important issues facing the community, and responded to requests six times a year, granting approximately $3 million in responsive grants in a community of approximately 300,000 people.

Beginning in 2016, the Foundation began to shift its community investment work. At the board of directors' request, the Foundation identified two broad focus areas in the most pressing areas of community challenge. Recognizing that the Foundation staff had largely served as generalists up to this point, several changes were needed to move into this new type of work:

- In 2017, Grants staff engaged in listening conversations with hundreds of community members. These conversations allowed Foundation staff to explore its two focus areas to determine where we might start our work. By speaking with individuals actively working in our focus areas, as well as individuals directly impacted, we were able to identify six initial priorities, which were designed to change and adapt over time based on opportunities and challenges. Our goal was to have an emergent strategy that was informed and guided by our community partners.

> **The Winston-Salem Foundation's Initial Focus Areas and Priorities (2018)**
>
> **ADVANCING EQUITY IN EDUCATION**
> - Positive and Constructive Behavior Intervention Strategies
> - Racially and Economically Diverse Public Schools
> - Anti-Bias Culture and Practices
>
> **BUILDING AND INCLUSIVE ECONOMY**
> - Reducing the Racial Wealth Gap
> - Access to Efficient and Affordable Transportation
> - Inclusive Pathways to Family-Sustaining Careers

- We began to use an explicit racial equity lens in our community investment work because we had learned how deeply race and racism were tied into our work. This shift also meant internal effort was required, and in 2018 the Foundation began deep internal racial equity work as an entire organization with assistance from OpenSource Leadership Strategies. Through this work, the staff began to learn new paradigms, perspectives, and approaches to its work, and deepened its understanding of systemic dynamics that have created current community challenges. This work also put explicit values at the center of our work, which increased readiness for other approaches.

- Beginning in 2019, the Foundation shifted from being a responsive funder to blend proactive community engagement and grantmaking; the Community Investment staff began to use an "evocative grantmaking" model to reframe program officers' roles. Program officers moved away from serving as responsive due diligence providers into a role where they were expected to spur and connect work in their focused areas; new competencies were required and developed around adaptive leadership.

Program officers began to build relationships with organizations and individuals who were connected to these areas of work, both professionally and via lived experience. All of this set us up well for being introduced to both Trust-Based Philanthropy and Emergent Learning.

In 2020, Foundation staff was introduced to [Trust-Based Philanthropy](#) (TBP) practices at a statewide conference, only a week before being sent home to work during the global COVID-19 pandemic. The practices were consistent with a lot of what staff was already doing but provided a framework that helped us see the overall role the practices played in relationships of power. Clarifying our values, we wanted to specifically look at racial equity across all our areas of work, centering communities of color first and foremost. Additionally, we sought to look at how power was operating in relationships and think intentionally about how we might redistribute it. Finally, we were also contemplating how learning could be encouraged and captured across our work.

Later in 2020 and into 2021, staff was exposed to Emergent Learning (EL) and it quickly became clear that utilizing emergent learning principles and tools would allow us to take trust-based approaches further and reframe our work and relationships with our partners, which became largely about shifting power.

From [Trust-Based Philanthropy in 4D](#): Four dimensions of a grantmaking organization's work:

Our Experimentation

Initially as we learned Emergent Learning tools and principles, our intention was to use them to examine our own internal work. Our first tacit experiment was to use the Before Action Review to plan for our board subcommittee meetings. Positive outcomes of the tool were quickly evident, as more individuals participated, more hypotheses surfaced, and improvements were made to future meetings.

After our first two years of work in the priority areas, we then used Emergent Learning tables in 2021 to assess them and make adjustments. Two of our Equity in Education priorities shifted after using the Emergent Learning tables. After these initial internal results, we realized the possibility of using these tools with external audiences, specifically our grantees from our focus area work; we began with these grantees because they were longer-term partners advancing work rather than one-time grantees through other grant programs.

ADVANCING EQUITY IN EDUCATION (2021 revisions)

- Positive and Constructive Behavior Intervention Strategies

- Culturally Affirming School Environments

- Equitable Access to Opportunities and Resources

Our entry point to begin testing Emergent Learning tools externally was a funding opportunity with a local nonprofit that was beginning work with our large public school system. While we didn't explicitly name our hypotheses at the time, we were expecting that EL tools might be able to facilitate better conversations with our grantees, to establish a clear line of sight, and set us up to capture learning. We recognized that there was potential to bring this organization together with the school system to develop a common line of sight for their joint work. Our program officer had been working with the two groups for some time, learning about the opportunities that existed for students. As a program began to take shape, her involvement with the entities meant she had deep knowledge about what was happening. In this way, we lived into the practice of "doing the homework" from Trust-Based Philanthropy. Using our trust-based lens, rather than requesting an application, we asked ourselves the question: Do we know enough about these organizations and their plans to

award funding? The answer was yes, so we made the grant and then required a Before Action Review (BAR) to be completed with both parties to kick off the work.

Using the BAR allowed us to clarify expectations of grant funding at the beginning of the grant, and by doing the BAR with multiple stakeholders/partners, it strengthened the relationship between the nonprofit and the school district, and felt generative to the partners, helping them (as well as us), develop a common line of sight for the joint efforts.

The executive director described:

> *We got a chance to talk in depth about some of the issues and get beyond just the surface of what you usually think of: measurable objectives and logic models. We wanted to do something different. We didn't necessarily have a clear logic model, rather we were experimenting; we can't predict the future and we don't know what's actually going to work. And so, because we didn't have that clear step process, but we had ideas, having that discussion helped us to see where everyone was, so that when we needed to make adjustments when something wasn't working, we still felt like we knew where [school system staff] stood on this issue and we knew where [the Foundation staff] stood on this issue. And when we had to make some other decisions, we still felt like that would align with that original discussion. So that was really helpful as far as being able to make adjustments and a feeling like there was a compass to keep guiding us.*

Following this initial experiment using the BAR to set intention *after* a grant was made, we began experimenting with repurposing the Before Action Review in place of a traditional grant application, and After Action Reviews in place of traditional reporting. Historically an organization would apply for a grant and then we would have additional conversations with them about their application. Repurposing the BAR meant that after

we had established that the Foundation and the nonprofit organization had common interests and goals, we could use the BAR to facilitate a conversation about their plans.

One example of using the BAR in place of a grant application was with a newer statewide organization where we were interested in exploring what was possible in our local community via their work. We began initial conversations with their new executive director about the possibility of adding some staff that might focus on our geographic area. She suggested it might be better for us to first make a smaller investment for them to do some investigative work before we made a larger investment; we offered the BAR as an alternative to a traditional application.

Using the BAR conversation in place of an application had an initial impact that was evident to Foundation staff: it prompted us to name what the Foundation's responsibilities were in order for the project to be successful. Using a traditional application, which is very much focused on what the nonprofit organization intends to do, there are few or no opportunities to name this role of the funder. But in having a conversation around the BAR, specifically the question "*What will make us successful this time?*" we quickly identified that, as the local organization on the ground, the Foundation had a key role in making the project successful. This realization also began to shift the power dynamic between the funder/grantee from our traditional relationship where the grantee was expected to propose outcomes and then be solely responsible for their completion.

We have now begun using the BAR in place of an application for most Focus Area grants. A recent grantee reported that it was the only way the organization wanted to do grant applications in the future and described the process as "the best thing since sliced bread" and said it set the organization up for success and made them feel like the Foundation wanted them to succeed as much as they wanted to.

Learning to Date

Using the trust-based principle of soliciting and acting on feedback, we recently interviewed three of our grantees mentioned above to learn more about the value of using EL tools with grantees and to identify opportunities to go further in our work. In talking to those orgs as well as our staff, we had many areas of learning:

1. **Using the BAR /AAR made several EL principles possible**.

   As we talked with grantees, many EL principles bubbled up, even if they were described using different terminology/language:

   - **Strengthening line of sight**: grantees described that using the BAR, either after a grant was awarded or as the grant application, helped to establish a common line of sight, either for them and us as the funder, or them and other partners involved with the project. The tool created a productive way of establishing expectations and getting on the same page, without that process being one-sided.

     The common line of sight with the Foundation was particularly impactful. One executive director described that traditional grant applications gave them little to no choice in their work; rather they had to say they would do something, give measures, and then have to prove they'd done it. Using the BAR meant the grantee and funder were on the same page, with the same goals in mind, which set the organization up for greater adaptation and success.

   - **Maximizing freedom to experiment**: When we began the use of the BAR with grantees, we did not clearly identify our goals/hypotheses on why we were using it. In hindsight, we were largely operating from the unstated hypothesis that if we used a BAR/AAR in place of a traditional application and reporting framework, our grantees would have greater freedom to experiment, and that freedom would result in faster learning and progress on their overall goals.

     One grantee described that starting out together and tracking learning allowed the organization to get to a bigger idea that it could also experiment with and test. Another grantee noted that the process provides the opportunity to reflect along the way, and to have an open and honest conversation about what's needed. They appreciate the fact that there is room to make mistakes, reflect, and make adaptations as needed.

   - **Holding experts in equal measure:** This principle was one we did not expect to hear reflected back to us. A staff member of the nonprofit that was working with the school system described the dynamic of completing the BAR with multiple participants present, with the Foundation staff member facilitating:

     > ❝ *It really felt equitable. It felt like here I am like on my first project, and here's the Deputy Superintendent, but we all were equal in bringing our own strengths and we all really were able to release a lot of the power dynamics so that we could figure out what this looked like without people feeling like they were the expert of this, or that we were the expert, but expert wasn't attached to power. It was a really collaborative way to begin and I think it put down some of those walls that we see in other spaces come up when we're negotiating contracts or partnerships with people. It felt like it created an environment of allyship.* ❞

     Another grantee reported that she felt like an equal and that it was affirming to her as a Black woman leading an organization that someone was listening to her expertise.

- **Keeping the work at the center:** Foundation staff was surprised to learn that the organizations that had experienced EL early in the process of receiving a grant requested more frequent check-ins with Foundation staff. Typically, staff was trying to keep the reporting burden low, and perceived check-ins as part of the reporting/monitoring process. The organizations, however, described the check-ins, in addition to the BAR/AAR, as helpful to advancing their work. In this way, the interactions with the Foundation's staff became about the work rather than a requirement that felt "extra" or apart from the work itself.

   One grantee described:

   > 66 *If you can create the balance in the relationship, check-ins don't feel punitive; they feel productive. [Foundation staff] have a lot to offer and the calls I've had have always led to 'oh let's make an introduction to them' or 'have you thought of that?' and I think that's a valuable role and it's been a good experience. I could have had a different answer if you were different people, or the Foundation hadn't been going down this path. We set up from the very beginning this relationship of collaboration and learning.* 99

   Another grantee described the BAR process as helpful as they created the job description for the position that was being funded. The activity was not solely to secure funding but served as a helpful and productive space for their program development.

2. **The BAR/AAR helped us to address power imbalances, center relationships, and prioritize learning**, all values from [trust-based work](#) that are important to us. Traditional compliance culture had us operating in a specific way for many years: an organization would be required to have much of its work thought out and pre-planned, even if it hadn't received any funding yet. Then the Foundation made a decision about that plan, established outcomes based on what the organization expected to accomplish, and the organization would have to report on how well they met those outcomes. The BAR reframed this interaction: we were able to come to the table to reach agreement on the results we were after, what we thought might contribute to those results, and to establish a system of adaptation and learning over time toward those results.

   One grantee mentioned: *"When you have the capacity to experiment and grow, you're going to reach your goals that much faster."*

   Another grantee mentioned: *"I loved starting from a place of feeling like we were partners and you knowing that our organization is young and being supportive of that from the very beginning, acknowledging learning and trying. To me it made it feel like we were on a team approaching the issue and having the recap at the end. I was like, OK, here's what we've learned and then I felt more confident going into the larger request. It was great to get to do it and do it in a different way."*

   Organizations also cited the value the process brought to their limited capacity, dramatically reducing the burden of seeking funding. One organization said that the one-hour BAR replaced five to eight hours of work, which she could then redirect toward mission-related work. Two organizations used the word trauma to describe some of their relationships with funders, triggered by funder practices and expectations.

3. **Early wins were important**: there was uncertainty and trepidation by staff, most of whom had not been trained themselves in Emergent Learning when we began experimenting with the tools. Fortunately, I had begun tacitly and then openly using the BAR/AAR with the community investment team around our Community Investment Subcommittee meetings. One staff member reported that seeing how the questions allowed her to contribute at a much greater level increased her initial interest in EL. She was the program officer involved in working with the school system and jumped in using the BAR for the first time with no formal training. If that first encounter had gone poorly, it

would have negatively shaped her perceptions of EL. Fortunately it was well received and produced exceptional results that kicked off a very trusting relationship with the organization. This increased buy-in from her and potentially other members of the team as they heard the outcomes.

4. **The pandemic created opportunity and openness**: many foundations, including ours, signed the [Council on Foundations pledge](#) in 2020 to increase flexibility and reduce burdens on our grantees. The environment during this time was one of openness that allowed our organization and many others to question and challenge long held orthodoxies.

Another small, technological change that also benefited our process was virtual meetings and how they increased transparency with organizations. First, everyone was navigating multiple responsibilities and challenges. As we entered each other's homes (virtually) for conversations, we were all more vulnerable and relationships happened in a much different way. A second benefit was the simple ability to share our screens. In the past when a program officer held a site visit, they would bring their laptop or a notepad with questions, ask them, and then take notes, which a grantee never saw, yet they knew this information was going to our board. When we began using the BAR with grantees, we began the practice of sharing our screens as we took notes. This increased transparency with grantees gave them the immediate opportunity to correct something if they needed to and reduced the mystery behind what we were writing about them.

One grantee described:

> 66 *What I really liked about it was feeling heard and feeling responded to and the way that [the program officer] executed it by sharing a screen. It was almost like an immediate response of 'I hear you. I see you. Let's respond to this.' He would put a statement up and he's like, 'is this what you said? Is this what you mean? Can I push you on this one? Can I ask you this one?' The fact that he gave us that immediate 'I'm hearing you now in real time. Let's respond in real time…' it streamlined the process and saved us a whole bunch of time.* 99

5. **Barriers exist both internally and externally**

● Staff readiness: As mentioned before, staff buy-in and readiness is important. While early wins are helpful, some staff members may not be as comfortable improvising and jumping in without more formal training. The EL intensive is a good option for staff, or other internal engagements specifically tailored to train staff on using the approach. Additionally, being able to have a staff member observe the use of the tools by another staff member can be very helpful as well.

● Organization readiness: we asked those we interviewed if/when this type of approach would not feel good to them. Two organizations communicated that their organizations were young and nimble, so it was not an issue for them, but could see that an organization that was older, more established, or set in one way of operating may not find comfort in co-learning. One organization indicated they couldn't imagine when an organization wouldn't want this approach, because it was so affirming. That said, they went on to describe that they trusted/had a strong relationship with their program officer, and also knew that they had a common interest with the Foundation.

● Existing trust: we have learned that an existing two-way trusting relationship is helpful when we engage in a BAR conversation. We have used it early in a relationship and at a later point when trust has been nurtured through other opportunities; conversations have been more productive when there is existing trust, most importantly that the nonprofit organization has some trust of the Foundation and its staff. It can be difficult for a partner to be vulnerable in the BAR conversation if they have not had past positive experiences with Foundation staff. It is important for Foundation staff to be transparent with a potential grantee about our big goals/north stars, and then give organizations a chance to ask questions and communicate where they see their work connecting.

- What we "sell" to donors: as a community foundation, our funds come from a variety of donors in our community. When those funds are established, one thing we have historically "sold" is our extensive due diligence and monitoring of grants. We do not believe our trust-based and emergent learning approaches diminish our due diligence or monitoring (and in many cases they deepen them), but they are also approaches that look very different from traditional questioning and monitoring behavior, which can center compliance over learning.

6. **Our own thinking wasn't visible to the organizations we were working with**. Two of the organizations we spoke with for this case expressed their enthusiasm for the tools and new approaches, and also were transparent that at the beginning of the process, they had no idea what we were doing with Emergent Learning, or why we were doing it. These were organizations we experimented with at the very beginning, and we weren't even clear with ourselves about our hypotheses and line of sight. This was a great insight for us to make our own intentions and expectations very clear up front. Our lack of clarity fortunately did not negatively impact our relationship building, but we likely could have improved sooner and better if we were clearer about what we were trying.

7. **Adapting EL tools is possible and encouraged**: the BAR/AAR are very valuable tools that use important questions to prompt productive conversations, *and* there are always opportunities to customize them to match the context. For our organization, which has been doing deep internal racial equity work for four years, it was important to add questions about potential harm we might cause to the BAR, and questions about how we might be perpetuating or disrupting white dominant norms in the AAR. Other organizations might want to adapt the core BAR/AAR in other ways to match their context and goals. We've also learned that the names BAR and AAR don't mean anything to the grantees and we may want to refer to the tools in a different way that helps organizations understand the purpose.

While conducting interviews for this case, we also got advice from our applicants about additional questions we could ask. One is to explicitly ask in the BAR conversation (or after a grant is awarded) about how often the partners would like to check-in throughout the grant period; we were shocked by the frequency our partners wanted. One partner also suggested a "DAR" (During Action Review), to use at strategic points during the grant period to make adjustments, so we used several of the AAR questions to meet that need. A grantee also recommended we specifically ask in an AAR or check-in if there are specific skills or capacity the organization needs to be successful; they felt this specific prompt would get at more information than only asking about challenges. These are all helpful adaptations we can make when using the tool in place of a grant application, without it becoming too burdensome or long.

What's Next?

Using the BAR/AAR with grantees has felt like a positive exercise for the organizations and staff to shift power dynamics and enter into partnerships with external organizations. We will continue to adapt the tools as needed, based on grantee feedback.

The discipline that the case study provided in conducting interviews reinforced the trust-based principle of soliciting and acting on feedback. It is important that we regularly incorporate this feedback into our processes. We have done

anonymous grantee surveys through a third party, but it is also important for us to have deeper conversations directly and then reflect back what we're learning and changing in order to increase trust with our organizational partners.

Additional work is needed to examine the use of EL tools with a racial equity lens and with additional BIPOC-led organizations. Three organizations were interviewed for this case study and only one was BIPOC-led. Anecdotally, we have heard internally in our organization via anonymous racial equity-focused surveys that

BIPOC employees do not feel as valued as white colleagues when they bring forward experimentation and innovation. We have also at times observed some BIPOC grantees express hesitation and uncertainty about funding "rules." We need to keep this top of mind and do additional learning on our approaches specifically with BIPOC-led organizations, which have historically been underfunded with grants.

As our experience and appetite for Emergent Learning grows, there are also opportunities to use EL with grantees beyond individual grants. This year we will be forming a learning community of grantees and co-creating a structure for the community alongside them. We want to bring strong EL principles and practices into that group, and it will be a new experimentation. Building on the principle of returning learning to the system, we will be more intentional about capturing learning as we go and summarizing those lessons; while it won't be as formal as a case study, we will capture learning more intentionally.

One final example of using EL with grantees beyond individual grants, in an effort to redistribute power, is the biannual process of reviewing our priority areas. The Foundation uses an adapted EL Table every other year to re-examine what has happened in the priority areas and develop new insights and hypotheses. There is early discussion of potentially engaging some of our community-based organizations/partners in those tables when the process is repeated in 2023.