

Philanthropic
Strategy That
Advances
Equity & Justice:
Five Principles

“IF YOU ARE FREE
YOU NEED TO FREE
SOMEBODY ELSE.
IF YOU HAVE SOME POW
YOUR JOB IS TO EMPOWE
SOMEBODY ELSE.”
—TOMI MORRISON—



Anand
Dholakia

Introduction

Philanthropy has a big responsibility and unique role, with flexible resources not available elsewhere. Foundations also face challenges including balancing short-term urgency with long-term vision, absorbing countless reports and recommendations, balancing community needs with board and staff perspectives, navigating institutional norms while responding to current issues, and facing critiques from every direction. Watching the needle remain motionless on major indicators can drive a constant search for elusive answers, *especially when taking on complex issues around equity and justice for communities that are historically disadvantaged and excluded.*

In this environment, a good strategy can provide your foundation with much needed clarity and focus. An organization's strategy should have a presence in its strategic plan(ning), theory of change, and approach to grantmaking, programs, initiatives, and partnerships. It provides guidelines for making hard decisions and trade offs. Good strategy can help your foundation connect the dots and tell a coherent story across its streams of work, and steer its attention and resources to where they will have the best odds of success.

Many foundation positions have a role in strategy development: CEOs and Executive Directors, Board Members, Vice Presidents of Strategy, Diversity, Program, and Impact, Program Directors and Managers, and Program Officers. There are ways to do better and this article outlines an approach to develop or refine your foundation's strategy with advancing equity and justice in mind. While targeted toward philanthropy, the approach applies to nonprofit advocacy and direct service organizations, intermediaries, and government agencies. It is possible to bridge the gap.

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The Art and Science of “Good” Strategy

In general, a good strategy maximizes the odds of success through the following:

Meaningful Goals

Vision and definition of what is most important to accomplish.

A Path to Get There

Priorities, activities and interim results.

A Clear “Why”

The underlying logic, rationale, assumptions behind the goals and path.

Continuous Improvement

Dynamic monitoring and iteration guided by learning from community engagement & evaluation.

A good philanthropic strategy should consider that this work is layered and complex, unpredictable by nature, and requires consistent engagement, reflection, and adaptation.

The Equity and Justice Strategy Gap

Simply undergoing the steps of a strategic planning process does not guarantee a good strategy. Furthermore, most strategy guidance to date for philanthropy (and the broader social sector) has been re-purposed from the private sector, bringing strategic principles originally developed to maximize corporate growth. This guidance tends to emphasize the scaling of innovative and evidence-based solutions that can predictably solve narrowly defined social problems. These patterns may show up within your strategy as:

- A strategic plan document that remains static;
- Segmented program funding areas, grant criteria, or initiatives;
- Lists of vague outcomes or generic activities labeled as “strategies;”
- Emphasis on singular solutions without full context;
- A perfectly illustrated theory of change and/or logic model diagram; or
- Impact goals to be achieved within exactly one to three years with 100% attribution.

The above gap widens when that strategy aims to fundamentally advance equity and justice. **One of the largest gaps in the philanthropic sector is good strategy specifically designed for advancing equity and justice.**

Equity and Justice Defined

Community Science defines Equity and Justice as follows:

- **Equity and justice** means that all people are able to participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. It means that race first and foremost, other demographic characteristics including ethnicity, class, gender, ability, and sexual orientation, and place of residence no longer determine health, education, and other outcomes.
- **We will have equity and justice when people** – especially from communities that are historically disadvantaged and excluded – have (a) Fair access to opportunities and resources; (b) Rights to obtain them, as respected by the law and free from discrimination; and (c) Capacity to take advantage of them.
- **To achieve equity and justice** requires recognizing how our institutions, systems, policies, and narratives have perpetuated inequities and injustice for generations (knowingly or unintentionally), and addressing the power differences behind these recurring patterns.

Therefore, when it comes to advancing equity and justice, good philanthropic strategy needs to consider the root causes of disadvantage and disparities and the roles of systems and policy change, systemic racism, negative narratives, and other factors. This look at strategy may likely need to happen in parallel with a foundation's internal efforts to strengthen its organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion. Let's face it, defining a strategy to take this on can be overwhelming. Common strategic planning methods fall short. Meanwhile, making things more manageable through narrow program areas, singular initiatives, oversimplified theories of change, or superficially applying diversity, equity, and inclusion checklists can lead to missed opportunities, reinvented wheels, and/or disjointed efforts.

“With volumes of calls to action and recommendations for what is required to achieve equity and justice, good philanthropic strategy can help maximize the odds of these being realized. If done well, your foundation’s strategy can also help translate its evaluation, internal diversity, equity and inclusion, and other efforts into stronger action and results.”

The Five Principles

Justice
4 ALL

I WANT
TO BE HEARD

Principle One

Lead with Equity and Justice.



A good philanthropic strategy needs to explicitly name **the advancement of equity and justice** as the end goal, and not simply as an add-on, checklist item or public statement. To improve the vast majority of common foundation program areas such as education, health, and economic security require addressing equity and justice at their core. For example, improving health versus improving health equity requires different approaches. Thus, your foundation's strategy has limited chance of succeeding if it tries to work in equity and justice as an add-on. Committing to the end goal requires embracing what equity and justice really looks like and your foundation's responsibility for helping to realize it. Don't drown and get lost early in definitions, acronyms, and frameworks.

Leading with equity and justice also means centering and honoring the lived experience and assets of those communities that are disadvantaged and excluded. This means moving beyond a technical process of gathering input to actually listening and valuing the voice of the community. You can start by considering how your foundation values which types of expertise, who possesses that expertise, and acknowledging and trusting community members as the primary stakeholders. Beware of the assumptions, mindsets, and biases that may exist within your foundation's strategic planning, evaluation, and other efforts. This can help the rest fall into place.

Your Next Move

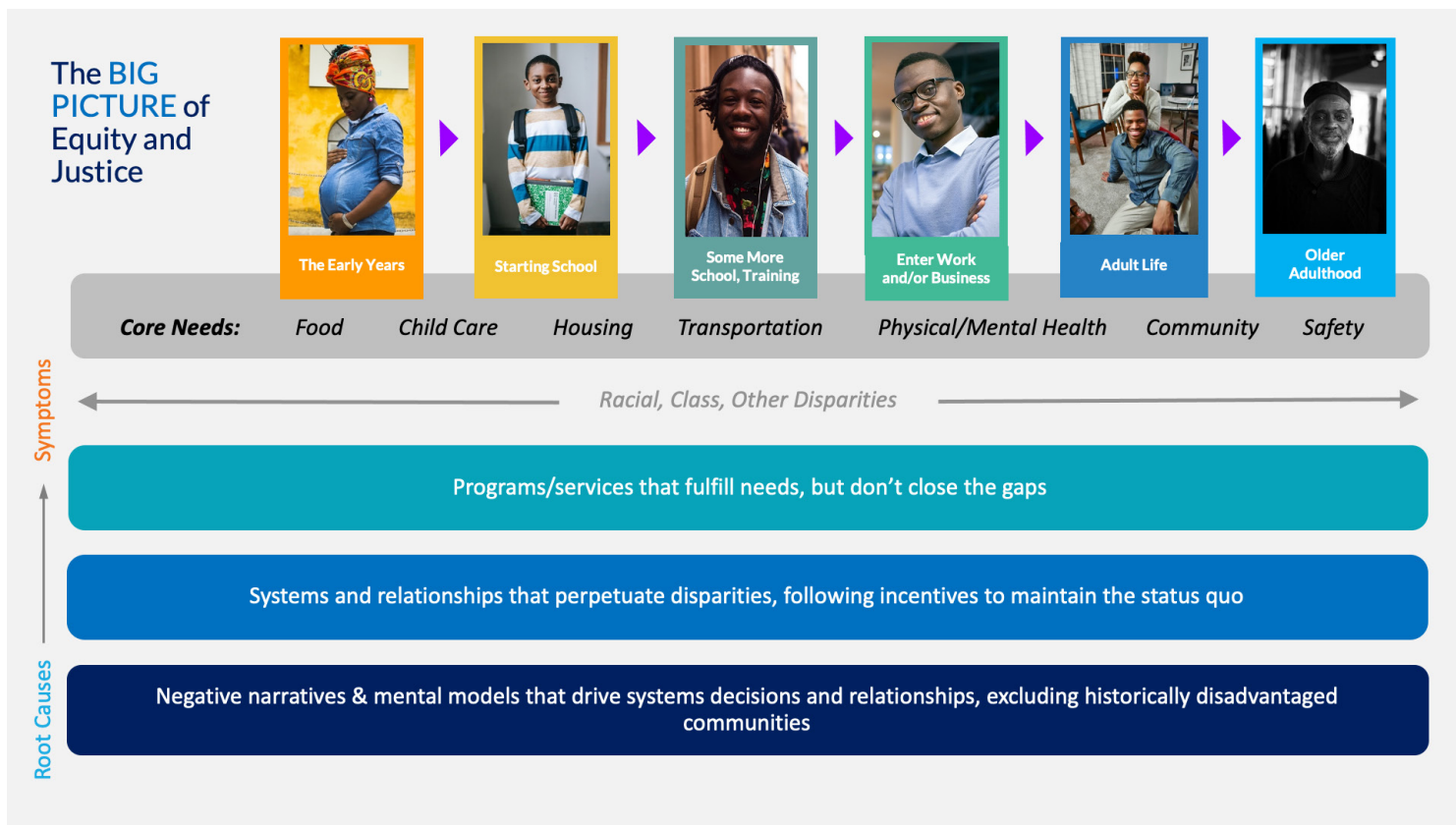
Start now, don't wait for the "perfect" time or situation. Whatever the current state of your foundation's strategy, gauge and discuss how equity and justice show up in your programs or focus areas. For example, if your foundation works on education, ask: Are we aiming for better education, or for greater education equity and justice? What disparities do we see, how do these stem from disadvantage and exclusion? And how do we currently value and engage community and other expertise to better understand this?

Principle Two

Recognize the big problem to solve.



Advancing equity and justice requires recognizing the reality of why disparities exist in the first place. This entails separating symptoms from root causes and naming the real problem. A mountain of evidence points to the historic, central role of systems in the marginalization of communities as a function of their design and implementation. This pattern has existed for generations, and the same story is repeatedly revealed when truly listening to community members, as well as the program providers and other organizations that help communities navigate this reality each day.



The above diagram shows how programs and systems affect longstanding racial and other disparities throughout every stage of life. Programs address disparities (i.e., the symptoms) through direct services and resources that help people compensate for their circumstances, and there is significant philanthropic attention to scaling, strengthening, and coordinating programs. The diagram also shows the underlying systemic patterns that *create* those circumstances (i.e., the root causes). These patterns perpetuate disparities in nearly every social issue that philanthropy hopes to address including education, economic security, health, early childhood development, housing, food security, and others. For similar reasons, members of disadvantaged communities face many of these issues simultaneously in their daily lived experience, with each one affecting the others. These systemic patterns, which include systemic racism and negative narratives around disadvantaged communities, lead to the following examples shown by research:

- Beginning as early as preschool, Black students are [far more likely to face harsh discipline, including suspension or even arrest, than their white peers for exactly the same behavior.](#)
- Resumes with white sounding names receive [50% more callbacks for interviews than those with Black sounding names](#)

Following on asking why disparities exist, advancing equity & justice requires asking why systems look the way they do, which begins with differences between the people who have power and the people who don't. It is essential to recognize the economic, political, and other incentives and power dynamics that encourage systems to maintain the status quo and self-correct in response to any change efforts. Ron Heifetz of the Harvard Center for Public Leadership said, "There is no such thing as a broken system. Each system is perfectly aligned to achieve the results it currently gets". Consider that many systems at play were originally designed to achieve results that were not inherently equal or just.

For example, in *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander details how consistent economic and political incentives have driven the marginalization of Black communities across centuries, in different forms beginning from slavery to the widespread segregation and civil rights limitations of Jim Crow to the current state of mass incarceration and over policing.

While many areas may benefit from improvements, beware the pattern of scapegoating and naming various new villains while losing sight of the big problem. Developing good strategy for advancing equity and justice entails a focus on systems change.

Understanding systems also holds significant implications for how programs and services can most effectively be supported, strengthened, coordinated, and scaled. This includes considering the roles that program and service providers should play in systems change, such as by supporting the change levers described in the next section.

Your Next Move

Conduct an honest assessment and discuss the level at which your foundation incorporates a programmatic vs. systems lens within its focus areas, and identify the overlaps or intersections between those areas. Engage community, grantee, and other available sources of expertise to document the role of relevant systems, what they look like, and how they connect to other systems.

Principle Three

Prioritize what makes change happen.



Throughout history, there have been several approaches, or change levers, that have been powerful enough to successfully address the big problem and advance equity and justice at a wide scale. There is evidence to support these change levers if you look in the right places: in the country's long history of major social movements and the latest knowledge around current community organizing, advocacy and policy change, and other relevant efforts.

Despite this knowledge, social sector efforts and resources are divided across countless, often artificially segmented, silos. It is necessary to drill down into social issues, target populations, practices, types of solutions, and process steps. However, it is also easy to get lost in the weeds of all the detail and argue the relative importance of certain approaches while losing sight of the bigger problem and opportunities for making shared progress against it.

Your foundation's strategy will have the best chances of advancing equity and justice by first stepping back from the micro to take a more macro picture, connecting the dots and orienting its efforts around change levers highlighted by history and current experience.

As anyone who has fought for equity and justice can tell you, there are no silver bullet solutions. The levers found on the next page reflect macro-level strategic priorities that offer the best odds to advance equity and justice across most social issue areas.

Developing your foundation's strategy involves determining how much to prioritize each lever, how to engage and invest in each one, and how they connect together.

Change Levers

Systems Decision Points Targeting systems decisions and power leverage points with greatest influence	Policy Advocacy Advocating for improved policies and their implementation, driven by community priorities	Community Engagement and Power Strengthening community capacity, connections, and power to shape systems policy, practice, and budget decisions	Messaging & Narrative Spreading messaging to shape the narrative, shift mindsets around disadvantaged communities, and build public and political will	Policy & Practice Models and Data Lifting a bold vision and transformative opportunities for reinventing systems, backed by models and data
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The change levers are by no means exclusive, nor do they imply that there are not many other areas in need of support and improvement. In relation, common investment areas like capacity building, coordination, leadership development, and research are not “strategies,” levers, solutions, or ends in themselves. Instead, they are means to support the change levers. Considering this broader context will likely lead to approaching these activities differently. For example, if your foundation invests in capacity building, its macro strategy and prioritization of the change levers should guide what type of capacity support to provide, to whom, for what purpose, and how.

Your Next Move

Gauge the level at which the above change levers are reflected in your foundation's grantmaking and other work, and context with which it approaches its supporting investment areas. Discuss what may be limiting the use of these levers and how they can be incorporated further.

Principle Four

Understand the universe and philanthropy's place in it.

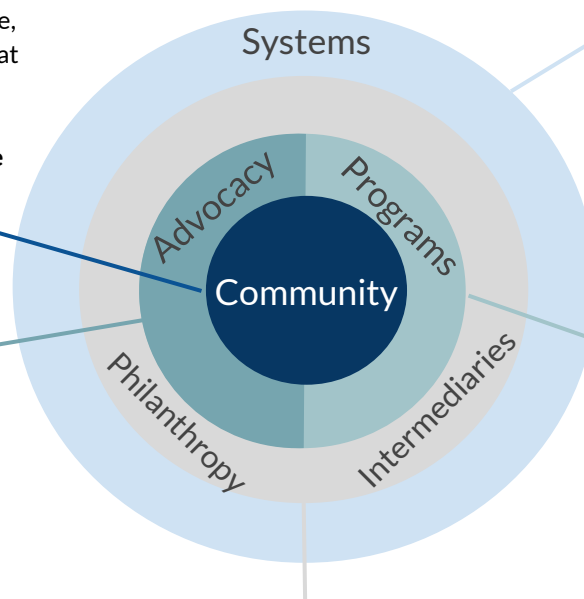


Philanthropic strategy that advances equity and justice considers the full picture of what exists and how a foundation can best contribute to it (versus the other way around). It is well worth the time to understand broad ecosystem that your foundation is operating in and who is doing what. Below is a basic illustration of major equity and justice stakeholder groups and roles. In addition to foundations, the stakeholders performing these roles include community members, nonprofit organizations, healthcare systems, community and faith-based groups, businesses, and government agencies and elected officials at all levels. Note that many of the most important stakeholders may be under your radar and can be engaged by having conversations beyond your foundation's usual networks and grant application processes.

Community: Groups, culture, capacity, and other assets that help community members connect and share mutual support, and power to shape the decisions affecting people's lives.

Advocacy: Formal and informal efforts to improve systems and programs on behalf of Community.

Philanthropy: Institutional and individual providers of financial and other resources.



Systems: Individual and groups of institutions, laws, and policies that collectively shape the broader conditions and environment people live in.

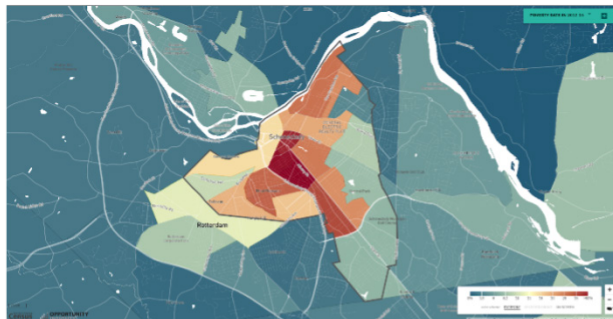
Programs: Direct services and resources, including *within* systems and community, that help compensate, fill gaps, increase access, and address challenges.

Intermediaries: Networks, capacity builders, evaluators, researchers.

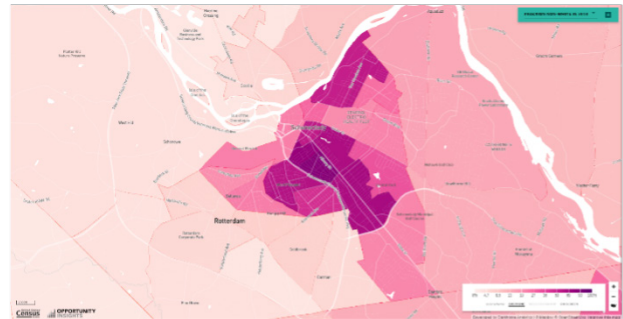
The illustration in the prior page and earlier Principles can provide important context for how your foundation's strategy prioritizes its investments and partnerships, as well as your foundation's potential role as an institution. Beyond investing financial resources through grantmaking and program-related investments, foundations can opt to serve as a convener, champion, thought leader, data repository, and more.

Considering the robust research on how one's [ZIP Code significantly shapes opportunities](#) and life trajectory, understanding your foundation's universe also requires examining how the big problem, change levers, and above stakeholders show up in the local places that its work has a presence. Communities do not reside nationally or regionally, but in neighborhoods, cities, towns, rural areas, and counties. The maps below depicting household poverty, opportunity, and race show an example of how equity and justice is highly segregated and can vary within even a few blocks in areas across the country.

The example below illustrates this issue using Schenectady, New York.



Poverty Rate 2012-2016



% Residents of Color 2010

Opportunity Insights. (n.d.). The Opportunity Atlas. opportunityatlas.org



Childhood Opportunity Index (COI): Neighborhood Opportunity Levels

diversitydatakids.org. 2021. Waltham, MA: Institute for Child, Youth and Family Policy, Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University.

In examining your foundation's universe in the above ways, consider the following questions to help shape your strategy:

- Who is addressing the big problem and implementing the change levers?
- What needs to be amplified and how?
- Who do we need to work with, and how?
- Where is there momentum, common ground, areas of shared interest?
- What are the gaps?
- How do our grantmaking and other roles currently line up against that picture?

Your Next Move

Take stock of which equity and justice stakeholder groups your foundation engages with and how (including others in philanthropy), how well this engagement reflects the preceding Principles, and how it may need to shift. Discuss what your work looks like in its geographic places of interest, and which roles your foundation should play in those places.

Principle Five

Remove false limitations and stretch your comfort zone.



Philanthropic strategy that advances equity and justice inherently entails uncertainty. The complex nature of the big problem, what makes change happen, and the universe around it mean that distinct impact goals that can be predictably achieved within exactly one to three years and with 100% attribution are hard to come by.

For your foundation's strategy to have a chance at advancing equity and justice, your team will need to work through any false limitations and discomfort that may hinder full understanding of the big problem and investing in what makes change happen. The false limitations show up as numerous counterarguments against many aspects of the Principles discussed so far such as assertions that:

- Systems are too ambiguous or complex to understand;
- Systems cannot be changed;
- Investments in the change levers cannot be measured;
- Such change levers will not show sufficient concrete impact; or
- Community members do not have the capacity or incentive to be engaged.

Such arguments can reveal limited trust of communities or grantees, or ideas that investing in change levers is too "risky." However, it is necessary to compare such perceived risks to the significant current level of attention and investment spent in areas that will not move the needle on equity and justice, and the far greater risk of philanthropy continuing to spin its collective wheels for decades to come.

Real advancement requires again checking the underlying assumptions, mindsets, and biases that exist within your foundation around communities that are disadvantaged and excluded, potential grantee organizations, and partners. Look for how these mindsets could influence strategy and practice, possibly limiting or even harming your foundation's contribution.

Your Next Move

Discuss how and where myths, misconceptions, and perceived risks may be holding your foundation back from going all in with a strategy that advances equity and justice, and define steps to address them.

Putting All Together and Moving Forward

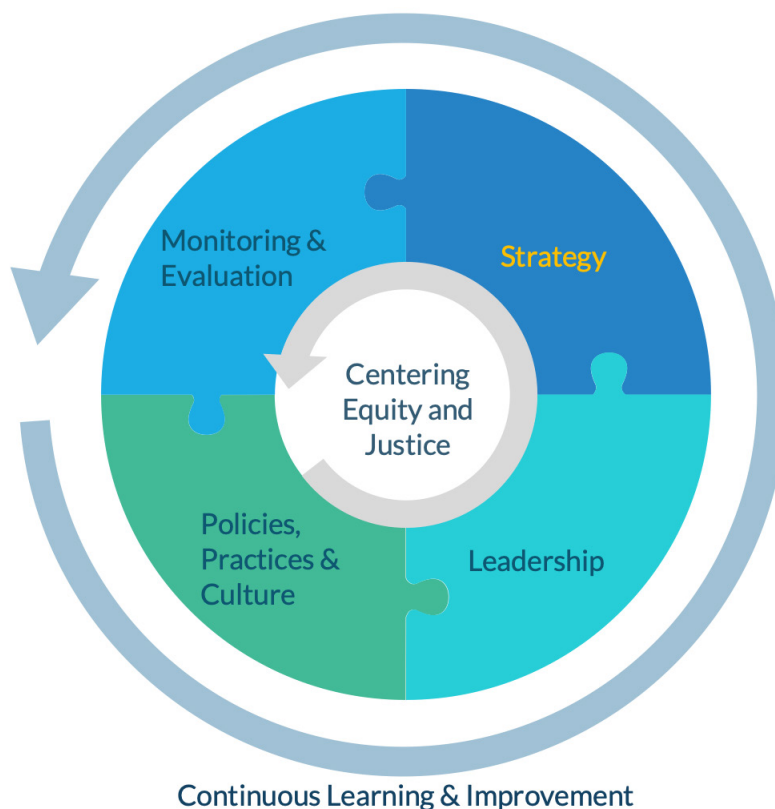
Investing the necessary time and attention to develop good strategy can work within your foundation's given resources and result in an immense return on investment. Plus, a good strategy can help advance equity and justice by addressing the big problem head on and prioritizing what makes change happen.

Your foundation can strengthen its strategy to better advance equity and justice no matter where it is starting from. There are likely already multiple forums for discussing, developing, assessing, and refining strategy – from formal strategic planning to leadership and board meetings to diversity, equity and inclusion and evaluation

efforts. Whether explicit or not, your foundation's strategy shows up all the time, and should be addressed on a continuous basis beyond a traditional strategic planning schedule every year or few years.

To ensure that the strategy honors equity and justice, it essential that the process of developing it emphasizes the voice of communities and organizations closest to the work.

In taking on your foundation's strategy, just make sure to give it a fighting chance. It was strategy guru, Peter Drucker, who first stated, "culture eats strategy for breakfast." Like your foundation as an institution, its strategy does not exist in a vacuum. Organizational elements like values, beliefs, norms, relationships and dynamics, behaviors and habits, existing incentives, and others can make or break any strategy.



Strategy that advances equity and justice has the best chance of thriving if it is integrated with other foundation efforts. The diagram demonstrates how strategy is one component among several required to fully center equity and justice within a foundation.

Your foundation's strategy can guide and support, and be reinforced by, how the foundation centers equity and justice in its approach to monitoring and evaluation, philanthropic policies, practices, and culture such as around grantmaking, organizational leadership, and approach to continuous learning and improvement. All the parts are interconnected and support each other toward a common goal. Connecting your foundation's efforts in these areas, including internal diversity, equity and inclusion work, to the development of an equity and justice strategy can help connect those efforts to concrete actions and provide an external focus to balance out internal work.

In the same way that advancing equity and justice requires reimagining systems and what is possible, it may also require some reimagining of your foundation's strategy and the process around it. No matter where you are starting from, the Five Principles provide a clear path and next steps for your foundation, and for philanthropy overall, to move forward.

To receive a free review of your foundation's strategy, contact us

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About Anand

Anand Dholakia has expertise in strategy development for foundations, non-profits and complex initiatives, collective action, capacity building, and developmental evaluation. His work focuses on helping organizations drive community and systems change in the pursuit of equity and justice, in both national and place-based settings. He has experience working with national and local foundations, cross-sector networks, nonprofit service provider, advocacy and intermediary organizations, community-based groups, and government agencies. Anand has worked in the areas of early childhood, health, youth development, K-12 and postsecondary education, economic security, and healthy and fulfilling aging, including working at the intersections of these issues. Anand specializes in developing holistic, adaptive equity strategies by engaging community members and cross-sector stakeholders and by recognizing the daily lived experience and assets of communities, roles of systems and programs, and diversity of stakeholders working across the social change ecosystem. His work has been applied to shift conversations and resources across communities and to help accelerate national equity movements.

At Community Science, Anand provides strategic and technical direction for strategic planning, capacity building and developmental evaluation projects. In his spare time, Anand enjoys songwriting and guitar, fitness, hiking, and playing sports with his two young boys.

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