

The Ford Family Foundation  
Ford Institute for Community Building  
**Working Teams: The Shift to Community Building**

By **John Pattison**

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*This article tells the story of how the Ford Institute for Community Building has made working teams one of the ways it has refined and modeled its new Community Building Approach. It includes lessons learned, key challenges, opportunities and best practices.*

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In spring 2015, the USDA's Economic Research Service confirmed what many of us who work with rural nonprofits were already thinking: When it comes to foundation grants, rural communities often get the short end of the stick.

A study analyzing awards made by the nation's largest foundations from 2005 to 2010 found that rural communities account for about 19 percent of the U.S. population, yet they only receive six to seven percent of grants. In addition, the average value of grants to rural nonprofits was \$88 per resident—less than half the per capita value of grants given to non-rural communities.<sup>1</sup>

That's why The Ford Family Foundation plays such a strategic role for rural communities in Oregon and Northern California. Kenneth Ford's and Hallie Ford's personal philanthropy began in 1957. The Foundation, in its current form was established in 1996; it is Oregon's – maybe the country's – only major foundation with a rural focus. It was established by Kenneth

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dailyyonder.com/rural-gets-less-foundation-money/2015/06/29/7893/>

Ford as a way of giving back to the communities where his company, Roseburg Forest Products, had been operating since the late '30s. The Foundation has since grown to become one of Oregon's largest foundations by assets (nearly \$900 million).

In 2001, the Foundation's board of directors approved a plan creating the Ford Institute for Community Building, an initiative designed to help strengthen small- to mid-sized communities in Oregon and Siskiyou County. For about 15 years, the Ford Institute focused most of its efforts on training rural leaders through year-long leadership cohorts, as well as offering grants. The initial goal for the leadership program had been to train 5,000 people in 80 rural hubs over 10 years. In the end, more than 6,000 people participated in 88 hubs over 13 years.

With the exception of its scholarship program, the Ford Institute for Community Building became arguably The Ford Family Foundation's most visible initiative. Those rural residents who hadn't participated in the leadership training directly heard more about it as cohort projects came to life, in the form of gazebos, playgrounds, events, bike racks, and other community-enriching initiatives. Program graduates were passionate about the program and became its best evangelists. After participating in my own community's training, I became one too.

With support harder to come by, rural practitioners are especially attuned to shifts in the philanthropic landscape. Sometimes these changes are subtle. Occasionally they are unmistakable seismic events.

For Oregon communities, the earthquake came in August 2015, when Foundation President Anne Kubisch announced that the Ford Institute was pivoting its focus from *leadership development* to *community development*. At the heart of this shift was the belief that it wasn't the Foundation or the Ford Institute, but rather *rural residents themselves* who were best positioned to identify and address the needs and opportunities in their

communities. This new focus came to be known as the Community Building Approach (CBA).

Pivoting from leadership development to community development was more than just semantics. Many community leaders had trouble understanding the new vision. The ideas, language, processes, and roles of the CBA were unfamiliar. For a time, uncertainty prevailed.

## **FROM SKEPTICS TO CHAMPIONS**

In the three years since the transition was announced, one of the primary ways in which the Ford Institute has articulated, modeled and refined the new Community Building Approach has been through the use of *working teams*.

A working team is a group of residents who come together to take tangible action toward a long-term vision or goal. There are two major ways in which a working team can be distinguished from a typical committee. The first is that a working team has a bias toward action; the word “work” is right there in the name. The second is that a working team is always resident-led. From the beginning, a working team enfolded into the design and decision-making processes those who will be most affected by them. Within the context of the Ford Institute, working teams now assist staff in creating programs, processes, events, and materials that support rural community development.

As part of the first working team, I saw how new team members joined feeling uncertain, even skeptical, about the new Community Building Approach, but left as its biggest champions. We began to understand that far from *replacing* the leadership program, the CBA framework was *building* on the resource investment that had been made by the Ford Institute (6,000 rural leaders trained, hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants) as well as the time investment made by those local leaders

themselves. The Community Building Approach was putting rural residents at the center of the process.

Denise Holmes, the library director from Banks, Oregon, and another participant in Working Team #1, said at the cohort's conclusion, "We have the tools to take growth and development into our own hands, with Ford as a supportive partner."

Kathy DeBone, a longtime community advocate from La Pine, Oregon, echoed those sentiments, describing the CBA as "the next leg of our community building journey."

Through my own experience participating in several working teams, I have come to believe that working teams can be a powerful tool for addressing critically important conversations about diversity, equity, sharing power, and the polarization tearing at the fabric of our communities.

Here's how the Ford Institute has used working teams to embody and enact its Community Building Approach in rural Oregon and northern California:

### **FROM GRANTMAKER TO CHANGEMAKER**

At the heart of the new Community Building Approach (CBA) is the conviction that real and lasting change wells up from within the community, since it is the community itself that is best positioned to know its own assets and needs.

The first draft of the CBA framework, including its key principles and practices, was developed by Roque Barros and Max Gimbel, the Ford Institute's director and associate director, respectively.

After they created a draft of the CBA framework, Barros and Gimbel road-tested it (almost literally), refining it through dozens of conversations with rural people in towns across Oregon and northern California.

While they were helping rural communities understand the transition from leadership development to community development, Foundation President Anne Kubisch, was working with board and staff to help facilitate the transition internally.

“We’re not a distant check-writer in [Roseburg, Oregon] that just drops in and leaves. Being that distant check-writer is a place that foundations can comfortably sit,” Kubisch said. “Instead, we’re a participant in the process. We’re all in the mix together, one of many actors. It’s a very different role for us, and frankly I think we are trying a very different model of philanthropy.”

As the Foundation has changed its approach from the *transactional* to the *relational*, and from the *prescriptive* to the *responsive*, working teams have become essential. Kubisch said she has been surprised, delighted, and humbled by how the working teams have unfolded.

“The working teams help *us*,” she said. “I’ve been amazed how generous working team members have been with their time. It’s astonishing, but I’m so grateful. It’s been a privilege to work with so many brilliant and dedicated people.”

Working teams endeavor to be community-centered, asset-based, inclusive, and responsive. “Participation in working teams has helped people better understand CBA, promote it, and use it at home,” Barros said. In fact, Barros doesn’t think it would have been possible to make a successful transition to the Community Building Approach *without* the working teams. “If you believe in resident-led work,” he said, “you have to practice what you preach at the foundation level.”

## HOW WORKING TEAMS WORK

As I write this article, the sixth working team is just getting off the ground. The first five working teams provided input to help develop staff positions, organize gatherings and conferences, generate grant processes and guidelines, facilitate the transition to the new Community Building Approach, and more. The Ford Institute plans to continue with high-level working teams, including Working Team #7 and beyond.

The Ford Institute is also expanding into other types of working teams. Field coordinators, full-time positions, are now running their own local working teams. The Ford Institute is also experimenting with working teams built around a specific topic. For example, a “Digital Commons” working team was created around technology and online engagement. Sixteen team members explored potential new initiatives related to community websites, the use of social media in community development, and rural access to video conferencing technology.

Most working teams follow the same general format: They meet three times, in person or via the Internet, over the course of about six months. In-person gatherings are usually held on Friday afternoon through Saturday afternoon. Team members give input on a draft agenda. They also help facilitate segments of the work session.

Working team members are volunteers drawn from across Oregon and Siskiyou County. Gatherings are held in a variety of locations around the state. The time commitment is significant, but thus far the Institute has been able to draw from a deep well of enthusiastic volunteers. To include as many people in the process as possible, while also trying to maintain some continuity, volunteers are usually only allowed to serve on two working teams.

## WHY WORKING TEAMS WORK

Every working team participant I interviewed said they had experience serving on groups that *aspired* to be resident-led, but that the Ford Institute's working teams were different

One thing that distinguishes the Ford Institute's working teams from other resident-informed groups is that members are brought in very early in the process. Shawn Irvine, a member of Working Team #3 and the economic development director for the town of Independence, Oregon, described how professionals in other contexts will get most of the project done, then bring it back to constituents and say, "This is what you were looking for, right?"

Max Gimbel said, "We're bringing a less-finished product to our working teams to allow for a generative process where the group has greater ownership."

Gimbel compared the working teams to the advisory groups the Ford Institute used to run. Previously, staff would bring to the advisory group something that was 90 percent done, to confirm what they knew and to finish that last 10 percent. Gimbel would go into meetings nervous that the group wasn't going to like something, because they likely weren't going to be able to change it much anyway.

"We weren't sharing power in a meaningful way," he said. "But with the working teams, we will bring something that is 10 to 15 percent done and then the people really build it. That feels very different."

Dana Perry of Sisters, Oregon (also a member of Working Team #3) has participated in a lot of committees, especially in her work as a research methodologist consultant for veterans' mental health care. These groups tend to be very hierarchical, even when they say they're not. In contrast, she felt like the working teams were "genuinely flat."

“I was impressed with Ford’s interest in inclusivity and hearing different perspectives,” she said. “I never felt like they were leading and we were following. They set the stage for a truly collaborative experience.”

## **CAUTIONS, CHALLENGES, AND LESSONS LEARNED**

Nearly all the participants I interviewed described their working team experience in overwhelmingly positive terms. And, without exception, everyone said they would participate again if given the opportunity. But several team members, as well as a couple of Ford Institute staff, also voiced cautions.

More than one team member expressed concern that the quality of participants’ contributions may be diminished by the fear of somehow estranging themselves from the Foundation, a huge funder in rural communities.

Ash Shepherd, the education director at a nonprofit technology firm, as well as a member of the Digital Commons working team, put it this way: “How does the Foundation get honest feedback when people don’t want to alienate those with the wallet? This is something Ford needs to address.”

Team member Shawn Irvine described joining a working team as “enlightened self-interest.” He was intrigued by the opportunity to help shape a grant program to which he was potentially going to apply in the future.

To a certain extent, the Ford Institute’s new Community Building Approach is energized by that “enlightened self-interest.” The rural leaders at the table are from the communities that will be requesting the Foundation’s help. They have a stake in getting it right. “The greater the candor, the better the product,” said Gimbel.

Ultimately, said Roque Barros, the two best ways to ensure candid input are (1) to continually build relationships to get to a point of trust, and (2) to recruit to your working team a truly diverse group of people. “Not everyone is comfortable speaking their mind or being challenged,” he said. “So you need to make sure that you include folks who *are* willing to speak up, share opinions, challenge ideas, challenge what’s being said, even challenge the direction something might be headed. Hopefully that encourages those who are uncomfortable speaking up to voice their own perspectives—either directly to us, or through the more vocal members.”

Another concern is whether the Ford Institute’s working teams might actually work at cross-purposes to the Institute’s stated principle of “profound inclusivity.”

Serving on a working team requires a significant commitment in time and travel. Some staff and participants worry that the structure of the working teams inadvertently excludes those who can’t take Fridays off work or school, can’t afford to do more volunteer work, or can’t drive in from especially remote regions.

The challenges of true inclusivity are being felt at the local level too. Maurizio Valerio, one of the Ford Institute’s full-time field coordinators, served on Working Teams #1 and #3. As part of his role as field coordinator, Valerio facilitates two working teams across eight counties in eastern Oregon.

“I didn’t give them a topic. I gave them breakfast,” Valerio said, recalling the working teams’ origins. “At the breakfast I only ask two questions: What is one thing everyone around this table needs to know about our community? And what is one exciting or challenging thing you have experienced in the last month? These are general questions, but they get the conversation going.”

When inviting people to serve on the working teams, Valerio tried to draw from different walks of life. Participants include a bus driver, a retired teacher, and a young man who works for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. Yet Valerio knows his group isn't as diverse as it needs to be. "We're still missing the blue-collar folks," he said. "They can't come to our breakfast at 7:00 in the morning. If you have [an 8-to-5] job, you can't do it. That's a challenge: the voices we hear are the usual suspects."

The challenge of making working teams truly inclusive is one Roque Barros and Max Gimbel talk about often. They want to recruit participants from other underrepresented groups, diversifying the working teams around race and ethnicity, language, economic status, ability, skills, age, and geography. They have considered doing single-day or even half-day working team gatherings with hard-to-reach communities.

## **CONCLUSION**

For all their challenges—and partly *because* of their challenges—working teams can be thrilling. This was certainly my experience and the experience of nearly every volunteer participant I interviewed for this article.

One possible misconception about the Ford Institute's working teams is that the Institute is lightening its own load by passing its responsibilities onto others. In fact, the working teams approach is more resource-intensive. I asked Max Gimbel and Roque Barros about this on a conference call.

Gimbel: It would take less time and be more cost-effective, at least in the short run, to do this work internally with a few staff. The working teams are an investment in relationships and capacity building.

Barros: And your work is also more likely to be successful when people own it.

Gimbel: It reminds me of the proverb that gets quoted in all the collective impact work. “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

Not only the has the quality of the Ford Institute’s work improved since launching its working teams, so, paradoxically, has its efficiency. “On the outside, maybe it felt like working teams slowed us down,” Gimbel said. “In actual fact, they sped things up, because we’re making better choices and bringing more people along with us.”

It’s gotten to the point that if Barros and Gimbel get intractably stuck on something they’re working on in their office, or if they are inspired by a new idea, their default response has become “Let’s bring it to a working team.”

At this point, the Ford Institute plans to continue its use of working teams into the foreseeable future, though they plan to check in every year or so to make sure they are still effective.

Still, Barros and Gimbel are open to the possibility that someone may come up with a better idea. If that happens, my hunch is they will run the idea by a working team first.

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## THE FIVE-STEP WORKING TEAMS PROCESS

for community advocates who want to integrate working teams into their own community building efforts

### 1. Build trust

The Ford Institute was fortunate that it already had close working relationships with rural communities and rural leaders around the region. It also had convening power and a trusted reputation. Yet Barros said he has been in other situations where a working team wasn't a good fit right away. Especially when working with a new community, he might start with a "guide team" instead and use that as a vehicle to get to know the group. Only when the relationship is well established would he advocate starting a working team.

### 2. Recruit participants

Recruit residents who will be most affected by the decisions that are made there. Strive to be inclusive, recruiting people with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Depending on resources, try to remove as many barriers to participation as possible. This might affect when you schedule gatherings, how often you meet, and the amount of work required from volunteers between sessions. Determine as early as possible if volunteers will be limited on the number of working teams on which they can serve.

### 3. Create a safe space

The diverse ecosystem is the key to a flourishing working team—but it will come with challenges. In fact, said Barros, you *hope* team members are willing to challenge and be challenged. Your job as the convener of is to provide a safe space for team members to be honest with each other and with themselves. That means team members have to trust you and trust the process.

### 4. Settle on topics, collaborate on an agenda

Depending on the situation, you may have specific topics for your working team, or your working team may need time to see which critical needs bubble to the surface. The basic structure for working team gatherings will vary, but the Ford Institute has found success building agendas around seven primary elements:

1. Formal and informal social time, paying particular attention to the power of shared meals
2. Fun team-building activities
3. Smaller breakout groups that go deep on a particular topic or session
4. Whole-team conversations that discuss progress from the breakout groups and establishes future goals and forward momentum
5. Short trainings that will help volunteers develop new skills
6. Peer learning—a chance for team members to get input from others in the group on a particular challenge or opportunity back home
7. Periods of celebration and reflection

### 5. Model vulnerability, both internally and externally

A convener of a working team has to be prepared to give up a lot of control—of the work's pace, many of the decisions, and some of its outcomes. This arrangement can be difficult for organizations that are used to controlling every aspect of a process. For this reason, Barros said a lot of prep work might need to be done internally — with staff, higher management, and board members.

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## The Ford Family Foundation

**Location:** Roseburg, Oregon

**Founded:** 1996

**Assets:** Approx. \$900 million

The mission of The Ford Family Foundation is help individuals become successful citizens and enhance the vitality of rural communities. The Foundation primarily serves rural communities in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California—with “rural” defined as communities of less than 35,000 people that are not adjacent to a metropolitan area.

To address the **Successful Citizens** component of its mission, The Ford Family Foundation offers multiple grant programs focusing on children, youth, and families, and it supports the development of rural education-to-career pathways. The Foundation also offers college scholarships for rural and non-rural residents, including scholarships for nontraditional students. The Foundation’s Visual Arts Program awards an average of \$1 million per year to support artists and art institutions in rural and non-rural communities alike.

To address the **Vital Rural Communities** component, The Ford Family Foundation works with rural communities to improve local economic conditions and develop community spaces that are open to the public and have multiple uses. This is also the home of the Ford Institute for Community Building, the goal of which is “support rural residents and local organizations as they take the lead in building their community’s future.”

[www.tfff.org](http://www.tfff.org)