

Exercising leadership and assessing its impact

Kevin Jennings (www.arcusfoundation.org)

When I arrived at the *Arcus Foundation* to assume the position of Executive Director in September 2012, the Senior Leadership team was in the process of completing a new strategic framework under the leadership of the Interim ED, my colleague, Annette Lanjouw. This framework sought to guide and focus our work by setting forth the course we put in place to advance our mission. Not simply a reiteration of our two major program strategies, the framework included sections on why we exist, our values and culture, what role we play in the world, our core competencies and what it would take for Arcus to be effective and achieve our goals.

At the heart of the document was an articulation of the three primary roles that we see ourselves playing — strategic grantmaker, listener and learner, and leader. Grantmaking, of course, is our core activity; though we have evolved to view it as just one of the many tools we have at our disposal to achieve social change. Listening and learning informs everything we do, including grantmaking and leading, and is the method we employ to stay engaged with the fields we fund so that we receive ongoing feedback about the extent to which our program goals remain relevant and helpful.

But what about leading?

In all honesty, we hesitated a bit over that one. We asked ourselves, was it really our role to lead? Weren't we resourcing movements and other stakeholders so they could do that? Were we just contributing to the troubling power dynamic that already exists between funders and their grantees?

In the end, we decided to address these valid concerns within the framework itself by clearly defining our role as a leader, articulating our specific collaborative approach, and setting forth the attributes that would guide all of the work we pursue under the heading of leadership.

The *Arcus* strategic framework describes our leadership role as 'defining the direction, shaping the agenda, influencing the field/policy/attitudes, and strengthening leadership in social justice and conservation.' While our definition of leading is relatively straightforward, it does, when viewed in isolation, raise a number of valid concerns. Is it philanthropy's role to shape the agenda and set forth a direction? What kind of influence should we be exerting?



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It is only when this definition is read in the context of our specific approach to leadership that it becomes clear we have credibly wrestled with these and other questions. The framework explains that 'Arcus advocates and facilitates leadership as a collaborative effort' that 'works with partners', 'makes information available to others', 'determines what is known and what gaps need to be addressed', 'encourages and values debate and dialogue', and is 'assertive without dominating' so that our role is clearly articulated to others.

In short, what we have attempted to do is to balance the very important need for those of us in philanthropy to leverage our position as providers of resources who possess a 'thirty-thousand foot view' of issues and fields with the respect and deference we hold for partners who are much closer to the work and are more directly impacted.

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Since our board of directors approved the foundation's strategic framework at the end of 2012, we have taken a number of concrete steps to ensure it does not remain a nice document that sits on a shelf. In particular, the assertion that Arcus plays three key roles (listener/learner, leader and strategic grantmaker) has become fully integrated into our programs and within our functional areas. Our department and individual work plans, our budgeting, our reporting to the board and other stakeholders, our evaluation and measuring of impact, and the way we talk about the Foundation's work fully incorporate this configuration. In addition, and perhaps most significantly, our efforts reflect this as well.

The following are two examples of how we have been exercising our role as leader:

- *States of the Apes*, a biannual publication: Over the last three years, we have worked closely with partners to publish the first two editions of a comprehensive series that is filling a key information gap in the field of great ape conservation – the need for an extensive examination of the critical threats

to these species in their range states and an update on all efforts to both conserve apes and their habitats and to eliminate exploitative practices. Published by Cambridge University Press, these publications reflect the input and contributions of multiple grantees and other experts in the field, as well as our own staff. Once completed, these volumes are made available to key audiences, not just as hardcover books, but as online content accessible through our website and through presentations, such as the recent *Arcus Forum* event on industrial agriculture and ape conservation, the subject of our second edition.

- *Arcus Leadership Fellowship*, a program for first-time executive directors: Over the years, the *Arcus Social Justice Program* had funded many leadership development efforts, but none were set up to help new executive directors learn to lead while also managing an organization. *The Arcus Leadership Fellowship* filled that gap by providing cohorts of first-time executive directors of LGBT organizations with one-to-one mentoring by long-time, experienced movement leader-managers. The program prioritizes Executive Directors from under-represented populations as a way of broadening the diversity of the LGBT movement. It also convenes participants in an effort to create peer-based support networks of new leaders throughout the US. While the Fellowship was conceived to nurture and support new executive directors, it also prioritizes the need to help them manage sustainable and effective organizations. The participants themselves are integrally involved in articulating their goals, in prioritizing what they would need from a cohort retreat and in shaping the program's future through an evaluation conducted at the end of year one.

In both cases, the Foundation exercised its leadership role to fill gaps we identified in areas that were highly aligned with our program strategies. In both, we enlisted the support of grantees and partners, in creating the *State of the Apes* publication, in the first example, and in tailoring a fellowship program that could best serve its participants, in the second.

Along these same lines, other leadership efforts we've undertaken include the *Arcus Forum*, a series of panel discussions on topics of importance to our program

areas; the *Partnership for Great Ape Conservation (PGAC)*, a group for donor education and networking that aims to expand resources for the field; and the *Russia Freedom Fund*, an effort to raise funds from individuals, foundations and corporations to defend and support the LGBT movement in Russia through a community-based funding process. Again, partnership involvement is a key component of each, as well as other leadership attributes in our framework, including dissemination of information, encouragement of dialogue, and a clearly identified role for the Foundation.

While we believe we have been able to bring the principles of our strategic framework to life through the exercise of all three of our roles, we still need to understand how all of this work adds value and creates impact, especially in the very important, yet also delicate, area of leadership.

The framework provides a helpful beginning by including a series of evaluative questions that can guide our assessment of the Foundation's work across all its areas as well as some metrics that can be used to measure our progress. Two of these questions in particular ('What has changed as a result of *Arcus*' intervention?' and 'What would happen if *Arcus* didn't exist?') are especially germane to an investigation of our role as leader. The following metrics also help us assess whether we are pursuing our leadership work in a manner that is both consistent with the approach and attributes set forth in the framework and on target to achieve important outcomes:

1. Partners adopt *Arcus* strategies and priorities and use *Arcus* data and information to advance their work.
2. *Arcus* facilitates the development and visibility of new leaders.
3. Available funding in mission areas is expanded.
4. Partners increasingly work across sectors and movements.

Like many in philanthropy, we are working to improve our systems and approaches to ensure that we are able to both measure our progress and impact as well as learn and improve. Many of our leadership efforts – including the *Arcus Leadership Fellowship*, *PGAC*, and the *Russia Freedom Fund* – have been assessed separately, both through focused process evaluations and through ongoing measurement activities. From these, we've learned that participant

feedback will improve the design of our programs, we've ascertained just how much new funding our facilitative leadership approach is raising through *PGAC*, and we've better understood how our grants are building a movement and securing safety for activists in Russia.

The next step is to aggregate across all of this work to obtain a clear picture of *Arcus* as a leader, not solely through the lens of accomplishment, but also through the lens of the values we have set forth for ourselves to embody as a global, private foundation working from a position of relative privilege. We welcome opportunities to learn with and from others in philanthropy who are similarly engaged in this important and worthy endeavour.

Kevin B. Jennings is the Executive Director of the Arcus Foundation and has made a long and distinguished career as an educator, social justice activist, teacher and author. He served as Assistant Deputy Secretary of Education in the Obama Administration, heading the department's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools where he led the Administration's anti-bullying initiative. Kevin began his career as a high school history teacher and coach in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. During this time he served as faculty advisor to the nation's first Gay-Straight Alliance, leading him in 1990 to found the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), a national education organization tackling anti-LGBT bias in U.S. schools, which he led for 18 years.

Kevin earned a BA (magna cum laude) from Harvard College, a Master of Education from Columbia University's Teachers College, from which he received the Distinguished Alumni Award in 2012, and an MBA from New York University's Stern School of Business. He has been honoured for his leadership in education and civil rights by the National Education Association, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Association of School Psychologists, the National Association of Independent Schools and numerous other organizations. He is chairman of the boards of The Ubunye Challenge and First Generation Harvard Alumni. Kevin also serves on the board of Marjorie's Fund and the Council on Foundations. His seventh book, *One Teacher in Ten in the 21st Century*, was published in 2015. Along with his partner of 20 years, Jeff Davis, he is the proud dad of a Bernese Mountain Dog, Jackson, and a Golden Retriever, Sloane.