The University of Texas at Austin
Center for Media Engagement
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# PROMISING ETHICAL PRACTICES IN SUPPORTING SCIENCE:
## INSIGHTS FROM NON-PROFIT LEADERS

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## SUMMARY

Ethical considerations are central to the daily operations of science philanthropies, advocacy organizations, and foundations, and extend well beyond the development and enforcement of procedures and regulations. Informed by the lived experiences and reflections of 14 key leaders of these organizations, the Center for Media Engagement reveals new insights into transformational ethics.

In-depth interviews delve into how these leaders are dealing with the day-to-day ethical realities within their organizations, as well as how they set and work towards their aspirational ethical goals. These aspirations touch on topics ranging from working more effectively with the communities they serve to reflecting regularly on the ways in which their organization is shaping fields of research. The findings can be used to help guide generative discussions and efforts to evolve practices related to ethics within this ecosystem.

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# BACKGROUND

In fall 2022, three science foundations — the John Templeton Foundation, the Lasker Foundation, and the Rita Allen Foundation — convened a multidisciplinary group of leaders to discuss the challenges and opportunities for science funders, advocacy alliances, and foundations who want to ensure that their work aligns with their values and ethics. Central to this effort was the goal of helping these organizations be self-reflective as they explore ways to manage, maintain, and maximize their ethical standards.

This study was initiated and supported through a Request for Proposal issued by these philanthropies to build on that preliminary work by identifying promising practices[1] and emerging ethical thought leadership across a diverse sample of organizations. We sought to identify promising practices that can be tailored in ways that suit each entity's goals. To arrive at these insights, our team: (1) integrated learnings from a draft report compiled as part of the convening; (2) created a semi-structured interview guide incorporating these findings and highlighting additional areas for exploration based on our research team's expertise; and (3) conducted in-depth interviews with 14 leaders in science philanthropies, advocacy organizations and foundations to identify deeper insights about how these organizations manage the ethical standards that guide the decision-making processes central to their missions (e.g., preventing conflicts of interest, selecting grantees, and forging partnerships).

The results are intended to generate discussion and self-reflection, rather than offer one-size-fits-all ethical practices. Notably, we intentionally left open the definition of the term "ethics" throughout our interviews to allow the leaders to extemporaneously identify how the term is meaningful within the context of their work. However, we steered the interviews toward a discussion of tangible ways in which ethical values shape decision-making within the context of organizational behavior.

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[1] We refer to "promising practices" instead of the more commonly used phrase, "best practices," because this label more accurately reflects the fact that, in our view, there is not yet a clearly established, widely agreed-upon, and evidence-driven set of ethics-related practices that can be generalized and used across the ecosystem of science philanthropies and foundations. Our hope is that this report can help drive this ecosystem toward the establishment of "best practices."

# KEY FINDINGS

This section highlights key findings as identified and described by interviewees. We present them in bulleted form to provide a quick and accessible overview, but they are not meant to stand alone. For a deeper understanding, we encourage readers to review the corresponding sections in the report.

**Managing Conflicts of Interest**

- Ongoing training that reviews policies and procedures related to ethics and conflicts of interest helps prevent and remedy potential issues.
- Many leaders emphasized policies that value and reward disclosure as an ethical practice (i.e., transparency) while minimizing individual fear of penalty or punishment.
- Identification and review of conflicts is an ongoing process. Both actual conflicts of interest and the appearance of conflicts of interest should be considered.

**Selecting and Managing Grantees and Awards**

- The impact of grantmaking (e.g., on communities, on the growth and shaping of a field of research, on grantee diversity) and its potential for unintended consequences should be reflected on regularly.
- While it's important to not shy away from funding controversial ideas in the pursuit of a variety of opinions, organizations should set standards (e.g., for what funding should be used, for data protection and privacy).
- Open and transparent communication with stakeholders is key to success. One way to achieve this is through open calls for proposals that are well-publicized, available to diverse pools of applicants, and include clear descriptions of the evaluation criteria. Another is to openly share details about operational systems when possible and to publicly share funding priorities, vetting processes, and scoring rubrics.

**Navigating Partnerships**

- Partnerships can be a powerful way to achieve ambitious and broader grantmaking and advocacy, but they should be vetted carefully, and the organizations should be value-aligned.
- Partnerships with controversial organizations may present opportunities to influence behavior, but ethical parameters should be set.
- It is important to understand what lines an organization does not want to cross when accepting donations from certain industries, sources, or individuals. Establish a vetting process, and consider the reputational impacts of accepting funding from each source.

**Navigating Ethics Violations and Crisis Management**

- Missteps are inevitable and should be handled quickly with honesty, transparency, clarity, and humility. Laying out a plan for immediate resolution is important.
- Be prepared for crises and know who will be part of the response team.
- Understand that missteps can occur within stakeholder groups, including grant recipients. In these cases, it's often helpful to communicate and offer coaching and support.

**Communication Strategy**

- Transparency is essential to organizations' internal abilities to identify, seek, revisit, and refine core priorities and projects. This can include practices such as actively engaging with stakeholders, being upfront about difficult issues, and navigating messaging across cultures and communities.
- Taking public stances on issues can be challenging. One approach is to make decisions based on how well the issue fits with the organization's key identity and priorities. Decisions ideally emanate from processes that require introspection, authenticity, selectivity, and strategy.
- Communication tactics that can be helpful include communicating the ongoing importance of ethics with staff, reviewing bylaws against evolving practices in management, and inviting internal consultation when crafting important messaging related to ethics.

**Committing to Serving a Representative Array of Stakeholders**

- Prioritizing representativeness in funding portfolios is seen as an ethical imperative that has transformational potential. Commitment to broad demographic representation can be achieved through methods such as holding open grant calls that are disseminated widely, requiring detailed reports on community impact plans from grantees, and assessing who is representing organizations and who is included in events they help facilitate.
- It is important to make connections with, and contributions to, communities dealing with issues such as health disparities, energy-related economic issues, etc.
- There are challenges associated with effective community-building efforts (e.g., time, staff investment, resources, administrative complexities), but these challenges should be embraced in order to meet the ethical obligations.

**Ethical Challenges and Opportunities**

- Measurement and evaluation of public impact have become increasingly important to organizations, but demonstrating impact can be a challenge. It's important to articulate clear goals with clear metrics for monitoring progress.
- Keep internal stakeholders (employees) in mind. Signaling purpose and values across relationships and communication can create alignment and naturally promote ethics.
- Be reflective and intentional in thinking about community needs. Be responsive to changing community needs and ask important questions.
- Consider emerging challenges such as the use of artificial intelligence (e.g., in grant writing) and how to navigate differences and lead positive change in an increasingly politically polarized world.

# INTRODUCTION

Our analysis of the interview data revealed an important narrative about the transformational ethics that are evolving above and beyond the regulatory realities of these science philanthropies, advocacy organizations, and foundations. While the leaders we interviewed spoke about a wide range of approaches for dealing with the day-to-day ethical challenges within their organizations, they also shared strategies for how they set and work toward their aspirational ethical goals. These aspirations touched on topics ranging from working more effectively with the communities they serve to reflecting regularly on the ways in which their organization is shaping fields of research, as well as who is funded to conduct that research.

Ethical principles are being deliberately and proactively refined within each organization through active collaboration with staff, grantees, partners, and communities. Below, we report the themes explored in the interviews and present excerpts from the discussions that illustrate how these leaders are critically thinking about their organizations' ethical practices and the actions they have taken to evolve those practices.

These data provide rich detail from the lived experiences of these leaders and should be used to help guide generative discussions and efforts to develop practices related to ethics within this ecosystem. Readers, however, should resist making generalizations from the findings and suggestions contained in this report, given the sample size and the fact that these were interviews from a single point in time. It should also be noted that there is some repetition within the narrative, particularly when a statement made by an interviewee intersects with more than one theme.

# FULL FINDINGS

## Managing Conflicts of Interest

We began the interviews with questions about how the organizations navigate and manage conflicts of interest (COIs). Here, we refer to situations in which a person is in a position to derive personal benefit from actions or decisions that occur within an organization. All the leaders we spoke with acknowledged that conflicts of interest do occur frequently in their work, and so they strive to rigorously identify them and recuse decision-makers from procedures when conflicts exist. This practice helps bolster ethical decision-making at every stage and every level within the organization. Two primary topics surfaced in the interviews: ongoing training and normalization practices, and ongoing identification and review of conflicts.

**Action Items:**

- Ongoing training that reviews policies and procedures related to ethics and conflicts of interest helps prevent and remedy potential issues.
- Many leaders emphasized policies that value and reward disclosure as an ethical practice (i.e., transparency) while minimizing individual fear of penalty or punishment.
- Identification and review of conflicts is an ongoing process. Both actual conflicts of interest and the appearance of conflicts of interest should be considered.

### Ongoing Training and Normalization Practices

Most participants noted the existence of organizational onboarding and periodic training for new and/or continuing employees that reviews policies and procedures related to ethics, as well as conflict-of-interest guidelines. In many cases, refresher training sessions are provided on an annual basis. One leader explained, “We have guidance for all of our programmatic staff, as well as our grant staff, on monitoring and being attuned to potential conflicts of interest at multiple stages.”

Another leader advised that their organization has found it useful to delineate conflicts of interest versus conflicts of commitment in training sessions. A conflict of commitment was defined as a “substantial unpaid role in a board or competing organization, even as a volunteer” that conflicts with the fulfillment of one’s obligation to their employer. This provided another perspective for identifying situations that are more subjective and should be discussed so that potential conflicts can be prevented and remedied.

Most leaders shared that COIs are not only openly disclosed in their organization but are also openly addressed in ways that are supportive of their employees and stakeholders.

When training and organizational culture encourage disclosure in a supportive and non-punitive manner, people are more likely to report conflicts. One leader emphasized that "disclosure, not disqualification" is a practice that encourages stakeholders in a variety of roles to be "upfront and open" about their possible competing interests or conflicts. They elaborated:

> You have to create an environment where people feel comfortable telling everybody all of it. And they're not penalized. And the organizations aren't penalized. But they're rewarded for it. So basically, you acknowledge it, and we give you credit for acknowledging it.

Another leader did have a caveat to the identification process: "Once you say, well, these are all conflict-of-interest issues, you create the illusion that, having addressed conflicts of interest, you are now engaged in disinterested inquiry. And you're not because you can still have conflicting aims and agendas and partialities and forms of bias."

Overall, leaders endorsed the use of communications and training that clearly value and reward disclosure as an ethical practice (i.e., transparency) while also minimizing individual fear of penalty or punishment.

One leader noted that their organizational members self-report and self-police. They explained, "[COIs] are not something that's easy to cheat on." They generally did not worry about COIs because they felt that their organization had them under control.

**Ongoing Identification and Review of Conflicts**

Many leaders also talked about challenges related to identifying COIs, as they are not always clear or obvious. To aid in the process of identifying conflicts, one leader discussed the need to differentiate a conflict of interest from the appearance of a conflict of interest. They asserted that both are important and need to be discussed and potentially disclosed. Another leader also spoke to this, "The first thing that always should be said about conflict of interest is that there's conflict, and there's the appearance of conflict, and both of those have to be managed…even when there isn't a conflict."

When it comes to avoiding the appearance of conflicts, one leader said they always pay for lunch to avoid the perception that "because someone bought me lunch, we're [going to] make a grant [to that person]." A similar example was offered by another leader: "We always pay for meals when we meet with a grantee institution because we never want it to seem like we're taking anything of benefit, either personally or institutionally, from a grantee. … Even if it seems pretty minor, like a lunch tab … being rigorous about the appearance is, I think, really important."

To identify conflicts regularly, one organization has an annual review process:

> We have a regular process for annually reviewing conflicts of interest, with declarations by everybody involved that get renewed and updated. Then at every single board meeting, there's a question, 'Does anyone want to declare a conflict?' People think about that sincerely. … It certainly is a conflict if some program is going forward that your organization is helping fund, and you're a member of its board; there's some decision point and you shouldn't be involved in that decision. One should recuse themselves.

Returning to the topic of conflicts, another leader said, "Our board members must abstain from votes on any grantees they are connected with, and we have a conflict of interest document that has to be signed before every board meeting by board members in order to ensure that we have full awareness of any of those conflicts. They must also disclose if they're on a governing board or advising board of another organization and if they have ties to a university that is connected to a potential granting relationship."

Another leader shared that their organization has a threshold of five years for retroactively identifying potential conflicts of interest, noting that it's not a perfect number, but it seems fair. Furthermore, they explained, "You can't get money in the door without going through a committee [of legal and communication experts who are not directly receiving the dollars]." This way, conflicts are reviewed by people who do not directly benefit from the funds.

One leader talked about COIs being reviewed collaboratively to ensure joint ownership of decisions. They emphasized that the grant-making endeavor is collective at every step in their organization, not just when reviewing grant applications:

> I'll make [decisions about COIs] in deep collaboration with my colleagues on the program staff. So, we own those things together, and we don't have a single person who goes off and handles them. Our decisions draw on different kinds of expertise when we need to, including legal expertise. But really, [making decisions about COIs] is a collective function. … I think it's a real strength of the way we do our work.

In terms of ongoing monitoring, one leader shared that they have an independent audit committee "that reviews all of our activities, and there's a hotline to the chair of the audit committee so that any staff person at the foundation who feels that anything inappropriate has gone on can go directly to the chair of the audit committee." They said this resource has not yet been used, but they did not feel this is due to suppression.

## Selecting and Managing Grantees and Awards

We also asked leaders about selecting and managing grantees and awards. They had a lot of interesting things to say about the importance of this topic, not just for organizations but also for the fields they seek to support. Two main themes emerged during the interviews: awareness of the impact of grantmaking, and open, transparent communication.

**Action Items:**

- The impact of grantmaking (e.g., on communities, on the growth and shaping of a field of research, on grantee diversity) and its potential for unintended consequences should be reflected on regularly.
- While it's important to not shy away from funding controversial ideas in the pursuit of a variety of opinions, organizations should set standards (e.g., for what funding should be used, for data protection and privacy).
- Open and transparent communication with stakeholders is key to success. One way to achieve this is through open calls for proposals that are well-publicized, available to diverse pools of applicants, and include clear descriptions of the evaluation criteria. Another is to openly share details about operational systems when possible and to publicly share funding priorities, vetting processes, and scoring rubrics.

### Awareness of the Impact of Grantmaking

When thinking about the impact of their grantmaking, one leader explained, "Although we are funding individual grants, we're also funding fields." They said this is something that needs to be considered on an ongoing basis. This leader also discussed the added ethical layer of ensuring that they are always cognizant of whether they are funding a diversity of grantees within that field. They regularly reflect on the variety of researchers and institutions that they fund (looking at location, identity, communities served, etc.), as well as the overall impact they have on the growth and shaping of an entire field of research.

To this end, one leader shared, "Program directors really get out into [grantee] communities. They go to conferences. They go visit grantees. They're visible in those communities." They explained that this is their way of understanding the community and the way in which grants can have an impact.

Relatedly, another leader emphasized the need for reflection and impact assessment:

> [Philanthropies need to] work on some kind of real accountability mechanism for their own power and their own impact. … I think that a lot of the new philanthropists who've had astonishing success don't always know that there can be a lot of unintended consequences for their actions and their money. So, I think feedback loops from the communities affected by philanthropy are really, really important and very underdeveloped.

Some leaders reflected on their review processes and ways in which they considered ethical practices related to fairness, access, and purpose. For example, one leader described their review process as intentionally "not based on personal connections, but on dispassionate evaluation [of] the quality of the proposals." This leader described their decision-making as nonpartisan and always driven by the public good, "If you want a grant with [names their organization], the least productive thing you can do is develop a relationship with me."

Organizations that operate in social justice spaces should be aware that there is the potential for controversy. One leader explained, "Grantees can take positions that are … not the ones that we would take, [but] we believe in free expression." They described this as an ethical decision to not shy away from funding contentious ideas in the pursuit of a variety of opinions.

Another leader explained that this approach is especially important when funding organizations that are operating in high-conflict areas or under authoritarian governments, as has been the case for grantees in the Middle East. For example, one leader explained, "We try to assume that our grantees and the people who live closest to the problems that we're trying to solve know best how to solve them." The leader said their organization tries to be accountable to those people because "one of the great benefits of investing in human development is that human beings can change faster than organizations or governments."

However, there are limits when dealing with controversy. Shared one leader, "We often have grantees who will call for boycotts or sanctions, and we don't allow our money to be used to support either of those two things. If that were the only thing an organization did, we would not fund them."

Another leader reflected on the ethics of working with human study participants. They discussed managing data and setting high standards for grantees regarding Institutional Review Board review, protection of the data, and managing the privacy of research participants: "They're collecting a lot of data about people, right? And so, how are you [going to] manage privacy? This is a very important ethical concern and really salient, and we wouldn't make that grant unless we were satisfied about that."

Another leader called attention to the ethics related to managing the back end of awards, specifically the need to provide thoughtful feedback to grantees periodically and at the end of their projects:

> We think it is an ethical requirement that our program officers actually read those [grantee project] reports and let the grantee know they read them and give them feedback, you know, have a conversation. Most foundations are over-indexed for the making of the grant, the due diligence, the negotiations about the structure, and they don't spend enough time on the back part. And we think that that's an ethical issue, too, because it's about respect for the work the organization does.

One leader highlighted an issue related to grantee compensation, specifically not requiring grantee work until after they are compensated:

> A lot of times it can take a while to finalize a grant proposal and sometimes the grantee will give us an aspirational start date. But for whatever set of reasons, the actual grant agreement and first payment to that grantee falls after that date. And so, we think that is an ethical issue because we think that it is wrong. Most organizations are eager to get started, and they try to start before they get the money. They try to start as soon as they hear a 'yes,' rather than when [the money] landed in the bank account. And that, to us, is an ethical issue because if we don't make sure those start dates line up with when the check gets there, we're asking them to take on work and do work for which they are not compensated. And that's a very common kind of lag in philanthropy. And we are trying to check carefully to make sure that we don't let that, let the enthusiasm of the grant team, mean they start to work before they get the money.

### Transparent Communication with Stakeholders

Leaders uniformly emphasized that open and transparent communication related to grantmaking and advocacy is key to success. A commonly shared example was to have open calls for proposals that are well-publicized, made available to diverse pools of applicants, and that include clear descriptions of the evaluation criteria. Some leaders also mentioned that sharing the rubrics they use to score the proposals with applicants is a critical part of transparency in grantmaking.

Additionally, leaders suggested that communication related to grantmaking should minimize the unknowns of the funding process, which means openly sharing details about the operational systems in place (when possible) and making public the funding priorities, the vetting process, and the scoring rubrics. Many leaders emphasized that communicating their funding decision-making process to stakeholders is essential for success:

> We try to keep the information about what we're asking for very transparent … What are the review criteria? … What are all of the things that we expect in your proposal, and how will that be judged? What kind of a rubric will that be judged on by a review committee? That way, everybody's on a level playing field.

Another leader brought up the need to be very transparent with grantees about the rules, laws, and regulations that organizations need to follow so that they can understand why some of the paperwork is needed. Otherwise, the leader said, they might assume the paperwork is an unnecessary bureaucratic chore: "Philanthropy has rules it has to follow. [Grantees will ask] 'Why don't you do this thing at this time this way? You're putting all of these pressures on us,' and I want them to be able to see that we're trying to make that easier, but there's actual tax law that says I have to do things a certain way. So, I think people understanding that foundations are beholden to rules, too, could be helpful."

One leader expressed that their funding decisions are data-driven and based on how well the topic of focus fits with the grantee's expertise and on how well the project fits with the organization's mission. They explained, "We do our work based on data and not based on who you know … and we're pretty honest about it. We are guided by our mission such that we're looking for work that does XYZ, and if [the project] doesn't fit with XYZ, then they don't fit our mission."

Another leader shared:

> We have actually found that articulating our values as early as our first conversation with grantees has been an extremely valuable communication tool, as well as an exploration of alignment. Several of the folks that we've talked to at other organizations have actually said, 'You know, this is the first time that we've talked with an organization that actually leads with its values.' If there's not that alignment there, then this is not going to be a collaborative working relationship, and so all of our solicitations (for letters of interest and proposals) require that applicants include a statement on alignment with our values.

In the interest of transparency, one leader talked about having grant agreement templates to guide their grantmaking: “We have templates that we’ve crafted for all of our different types of grant agreements. [We’ve] got like five or six different templates, which can be modified, but we are trying to operate off of a baseline template that was crafted by our legal counsel.” The leader explained that communication with their legal counsel is important, as is communication with others within the organization: “We have a person who specifically looks at budgets and does due diligence around projects — there’s a person whose job it is to look at financials of this grantee and it’s separate from the grant administrator. We want the person advocating for the grant to be separate from the person looking at the financial viability of the organization.”

Related to open communication, the topic of open calls for proposals was raised by several leaders. One said:

> Lots of people think you shouldn’t have open applications, because if you’re [going to] say no to a lot of them anyhow, it’s cruel to make people go through the process and then say no to a lot of people. I would say that would be true if we were operating in a world where everybody was equal, but in a world where sometimes you can only know that a foundation exists because you know somebody who knows somebody, I think having a public website and having a portal is really, really important. I was really proud this year to see we got hundreds [of proposals]; hundreds is exhausting, but great applications came in from some nonprofits we worked with before, but also some nobody knew anything about, and that tells me that we were successful in being equitable and accessible.

Another leader talked about problems created by systems that don’t allow for uninvited proposals: “There are many foundations, partly for reasons of being overwhelmed, who don’t accept unsolicited proposals. That practice means grantees have to wait around for foundations to come to them.” They explained that this approach makes it hard to discover new grantees doing exciting work: “One way you find them is that you hire consultants. But consultants have their own favorites that they’re promoting and vice versa. That’s a very potentially incestuous setup that I find questionable, frankly.”

One leader shared that instituting open calls for grants created a bit of a shake-up for their organization (e.g., one long-standing scientific leader within the organization retired because of it). They believed it was worth the conflict since switching to open calls led to applications and funding from a broader range of institutions: “I think it draws in ideas and talent [from] a broader range of places, nationally and internationally. And I think that will help advance science.”

## Navigating Partnerships

Another topic we asked about during interviews was how organizations navigate their relationships with other organizations. Most of the leaders commented on the power of partnerships while also raising some concerns.

**Action Items:**

- Partnerships can be a powerful way to achieve ambitious and broader grantmaking and advocacy, but they should be vetted carefully, and the organizations should be value-aligned.
- Partnerships with controversial organizations may present opportunities to influence behavior, but ethical parameters should be set.
- It is important to understand what lines an organization does not want to cross when accepting donations from certain industries, sources, or individuals. Establish a vetting process, and consider the reputational impacts of accepting funding from each source.

### Partnership Selection

Discussing the way in which partnerships are formed, one leader shared, “Typically, program staff are working with program staff at other philanthropies [and they discover ways to do] some interesting grantmaking together.” This can lead to “more ambitious and broader grantmaking.” As a result, collaborations are most likely to occur between foundations with historical connections because, as one leader said, “We have trust in the ethics of the people that we’re collaborating with.”

The idea of vetting partnerships carefully was raised by more than one leader. They noted that collaborations are challenging because they require navigating parallel processes that need to be followed at both organizations, which can be complicated. One leader explained, “Each foundation or federal funding agency has its own rules for how it awards or administers grants, and managing all that and avoiding conflicts is really important when you have lots of different partners.”

Although the leaders find collaborations at times complicated, they all agreed they serve an important purpose. One leader suggested that organizations need to be open-minded about potential partnerships because “the problems we’re trying to solve as a society are not ones that one organization or one sector can solve alone. It requires us to have others in the room.”

Another leader discussed their organization's processes for co-funding partnerships:

> We co-fund in a huge variety of ways with a large number of other partners. When it becomes formal, we might actually participate in something called a donor collaborative, or a collaborative fund, and those generally are situated outside any of the foundations that contribute to them [as] a fiscal sponsor … and they have rules and processes and legal standards that every participating donor complies with. So, we do that a lot. We've seen it be very successful.

However, the leader also added that because "it's one of the fastest growing areas of philanthropy, they have their own growing pains." They elaborated:

> So much money has come into them to manage, that sometimes their legal or their HR structures have not 100 percent caught up. So, we try to both give them feedback and hold them accountable, and also help grow the capacity that needs to be there. But I'd say it's not a Wild West at all. There are very clear legal parameters and processes for those relationships. That's one of the benefits of them.

Another leader touched on navigating controversy with partners. They felt pressure to cease meeting with tech companies because, whereas they used to be celebrated, they are currently more controversial and even reviled. However, they felt the pressure came from an overly simplistic perspective:

> That Google and Facebook and Amazon are evil is kind of a facile and reductive belief. I do think these companies are doing things that are really morally problematic, but I don't know that … what they're doing is so problematic that we can't have any association with them, and I don't think that the view that they're evil is derived from any kind of analytical reasoning … I actually believe that our engagement with these companies might have some influence on their behavior.

They added, "…what conduct is most likely to lead to the result that you want to have in the world? Sometimes working with someone who has a non-coincident view of yours is a way to figure that out. Now, if you're doing a really deep programmatic partnership with someone, the question is, can you set up parameters that ensure that your ethical ends are met? 'Here's stuff we are not going to do together.'"

On the topic of managing relationships with partners, one leader suggested:

> Be humble and recognize that you might be an expert in a particular area, but you don't have all the answers. … Individuals, perhaps with other backgrounds, institutions, and other experiences, whether they are partners or not, have perspectives that not only might be helpful, but it's also ethical to give them an opportunity and give them voice and give them space to state where they're coming from, and what they know and, how they might contribute.

**Creating Value Alignment**

At the end of the day, leaders noted that a partnership must be value-aligned because, if it's not, the organizations can suffer reputational damage. One leader shared an example:

> I'm watching an organization right now go through an issue where they had a partner that wasn't helpful for them, and it has damaged them reputationally, and I think that can sometimes be challenging for particularly small organizations. They may be resource-constrained, so to say 'no' to money is a hard thing, but sometimes that's the best thing for the organization.

Another leader talked about how they are proactive about ensuring their partners' values align with their own:

> One of the red lines that we have is we would not tolerate any grantee using our money to propagate hate or violence against another group of any identity. And so … we have a set of systems where we look at the kinds of language, not only that they might use in a grant agreement, but also on their own websites. … again, with the presumption that we are not going to intervene, but we don't wait to find out.

To help guide the process of value alignment, another leader suggested having one individual in the organization who ensures the organization meets its objectives, "I have a chief impact officer, which frankly, … is partially about measuring our impact. But some of it's about ethics because it's about 'Are you who you say you are? And are you doing things consistently the way you say you are?'"

Relatedly, one leader stated that they have seen success in their operations by creating a system where a statement on value alignment is created for all partnering organizations.

### Accepting Donations

When asked how they navigate decisions about accepting donations, many leaders described lines they are not willing to cross when it comes to sources of funding. One leader, for example, talked about how their organization does not accept funding from certain industries, as a matter of policy: “We will not accept funding from pharma. It doesn’t matter whether it’s ‘no strings attached.’ [Some philanthropies accept funds from] the foundation side of pharma, but we just won’t because we think it’s potentially damaging to our reputation. … We want to be free of conflicts. Not just the financial conflicts, but the reputational conflicts.”

Similarly, another leader explicitly listed alcohol-, tobacco-, and firearms-related funds as something they won’t consider.

One leader talked about how they vet potential funders. Their organization accepts funds from respected foundations without a formal evaluation. But for foundations that are not as established, the organization uses a process to vet donors that includes a due diligence search of the foundation’s history, where its funds originate, prior projects funded, etc. In the case of an individual, this might include a background check to ensure there is no criminal background.

Another leader weighed in on the topic of accepting funds from individual philanthropists who are known advocates for an issue or disease. In such cases, the organization needs to consider the impact of the philanthropist’s desire for a certain outcome and how their perceived advocacy might undermine trust in the findings that emerge from research they funded.

Another leader emphasized that it’s important to realize the issue of COI is about broad-level reputation and not just about financial conflicts. They stressed that organizations should ask themselves this question: “Do we want to accept money from [a particular organization], considering the way their wealth was created?” For this leader, that means their organization will never accept funding from pharmaceutical or tobacco companies.

One leader stated that they accept “almost no” funding from the private sector and that they maintain a “distributed level of support” wherein no single entity can dominate the funding. They mentioned that they accept donations from well-intended foundations, family foundations, and sometimes individual donors. The leader elaborated that they “generally do not put a high bar on [accepting donations] from foundations that are well-known and have been around forever,” but they also “do some due diligence” and have “everything over a certain dollar amount looked at by a committee.” The leader provided one example, explaining how they turned down funding from a foundation that had itself received funding from a company with a “questionable background.”

Another leader talked about never accepting anonymous gifts that cannot be fully transparent in terms of how the money was raised, who is behind it, and why they want to invest in your organization. Another leader explained that they scrutinize how any potential significant donor made their money, defining $10,000 as the threshold for significance.

## Navigating Ethics Violations and Crisis Management

We asked leaders about how they grapple with ethics violations and related crises. Here, the term crisis refers to a relatively high-stakes event that is stressful and requires a response because of the probability of significant negative impact on the organization. All leaders acknowledged that considering ethics throughout their entire organization and its operations is dynamic and can be messy. Within this context, and as touched on earlier, leaders uniformly emphasized that open and transparent communication with internal and external stakeholders is key to success. Looking closer at how to manage specific ethical crises, the leaders offered a variety of experiences and takeaways. Among the main topics that emerged were the inevitability of missteps and shared risks with stakeholders.

**Action Items:**

- Missteps are inevitable and should be handled quickly with honesty, transparency, clarity, and humility. Laying out a plan for immediate resolution is important.
- Be prepared for crises and know who will be part of the response team.
- Understand that missteps can occur within stakeholder groups, including grant recipients. In these cases, it's often helpful to communicate and offer coaching and support.

### Missteps Are Inevitable

The leaders concurred that missteps are inevitable despite robust policies and procedures and ongoing commitments to training. When they do occur, leaders stressed that honesty, transparency, and humility are key. A quick response is key to crisis communication in these situations. Communication should be prompt, clear, concise, and involve a plan for immediate resolution.

One leader shared:

> I was taught years and years ago by a wonderful mentor that if the answer to everything you set out to do in your job … went perfectly smoothly, that you've failed. … You're going to have to deal with [failure] at some point. 'Nope, this didn't work. This wasn't right. I made a mistake here.' … I think it's okay to be ambitious. Be clear, be ethical. Transparency is always there. Always part of the magic sauce.

As a result of this inevitability, several leaders talked about how their team is ready to handle crises as they arise. Here, the term crisis is used to refer to any issues that open the organization to criticism. One leader said their crisis team consists of senior leaders (including the interviewee), legal counsel, the communications team, as well as the directors of programs, and anyone involved with overseeing the specific program that is in crisis. The team is called into action for issues ranging from press inquiries to letters from Congress (often related to recommendations made by the organization). This leader emphasized that because all their policy recommendations are evidence-based (versus opinion-based), the team is well-practiced in providing the evidence needed to justify them.

Similarly, another leader's organization has no single ethics officer, but rather a leadership team that takes responsibility for ethics and consists of legal counsel, human resources, communications, and operations. They also maintain a "hotline" for grantees to identify issues of prejudice or harassment within the funding organization or the organization where the grantees work; in response, the funder may take action through "appropriate channels of governance."

> There was an incident in which a couple of grantees came to someone they trusted here and said they just didn't feel good about their interactions with a particular program officer. And so that is when we realized we were really lucky that there was the relationship of trust that allowed people to do that. But we felt like we needed to become more formal and create a system and put out the word to grantees that they don't need to identify [themselves]. You know, that they can call a hotline, and if they are experiencing any kind of behavior from anyone at [names the philanthropy] there is a way to report it and it goes into our human resources function.

Sometimes leaders struggled to explain — or did not want to disclose — specific violations of codes of conduct and instead focused on general policies related to violations of scientific or personal integrity.

One leader talked about the need to have clear boundaries for ethical violations. They elaborated on these boundary conditions, explaining that it's important to be "very clear as an institution about your red lines, to know when you are open to working [an ethical situation] out and when it is just like, 'No.' I think oftentimes [philanthropies] are not clear enough about those red lines ahead of time."

Another leader talked about the need to delegate ethical issues that relate to core programmatic work to the people who lead that work, but with the guidance of the leadership team. But they also emphasized that the ethical responses are decided ultimately by the leadership team: "Someone has to adjudicate who's thinking about the whole of the enterprise and the relationship with the different pieces to each other. And that's a leadership team — the institutional point of view. That's a CEO decision."

**Shared Risk with Stakeholders**

It is also important to note that missteps not only occur within philanthropic organizations but also within their stakeholder groups, including grant recipients. In these cases, leaders expressed that being supportive and offering coaching, communication, and a plan for immediate resolution works much better in the long term than investigations and punitive actions. One leader explained:

> Philanthropy is a relationship. ... it's a relationship between the funder and the grantee. And we're partners. And so, this stance that we try to take is to be a good partner.

Another leader explained that when they are required to investigate allegations of ethical misconduct on the part of funded investigators, they stay agnostic through that process and "don't prejudge" but act quickly and decisively once the investigation concludes:

> We had a case where a very distinguished professor at a very distinguished university had been accused of sexually harassing students, and the university found that this was the case. We immediately insisted that the university either return the grant or move it to a different primary investigator. It was a grant for a postdoc program. We didn't want the people who were being funded to suffer, so we worked together to find another investigator there. But we acted quickly.

Another leader discussed an ethical crisis wherein a longtime, generous donor fell under scrutiny for potentially unethical behaviors. The organization formed a special task force to evaluate the situation and make a recommendation, which was to return unused funds and remove the donor from projects going forward. The organization was cognizant that they could not change history, but they could forge a different path forward. This was a very difficult decision to reach, given the long history with the donor, but it was reached all the same.

## Communication Strategy

We asked leaders to tell us about the communication practices of their organizations as they relate to ethics. Two issues dominated these conversations: the necessity for transparent communication, and the challenges associated with taking public stances on issues.

**Action Items:**

- Transparency is essential to organizations' internal abilities to identify, seek, revisit, and refine their core priorities and projects. This can include practices such as actively engaging with stakeholders, being upfront about difficult issues, and navigating messaging across cultures and communities.
- Taking public stances on issues can be challenging. One approach is to make decisions based on how well the issue fits with the organization's key identity and priorities. Decisions ideally emanate from processes that require introspection, authenticity, selectivity, and strategy.
- Communication tactics that can be helpful include communicating the ongoing importance of ethics with staff, reviewing bylaws against evolving practices in nonprofit management, and inviting internal consultation when crafting important messaging related to ethics.

### Transparency

Leaders uniformly identified transparency as being fundamental to organizational ethics. Multiple leaders described this transparency as being essential to their organizations' internal ability to identify, seek, revisit, and refine their core priorities and projects. One leader, for example, described how committing to transparent communication means that their organization consistently seeks to engage in bi-directional dialogue with all their stakeholders. This includes the practice of sharing authentic perspectives from within the organization, coupled with ongoing, active listening. Doing so, they explained, is how they ensure their organizational priorities at any given time reflect a "spectrum of perspectives" and that the resulting projects are "deemed ethical and of high quality." For these leaders, committing to and facilitating transparent communication brings with it the kind of collaboration and inclusivity that are requisite to operating ethically.

Leaders also uniformly described transparent communication as crucial to demonstrating their high ethical standards, particularly within the context of potential crises. Leaders offered examples that cut across internal and external stakeholders. On communicating internally in the face of ethical challenges, one leader stated, "I think that the more explicit and transparent you are about things that are hard, the better, because you're [going to] get asked anyway. So, you might as well talk about [difficult ethical issues] upfront."

One leader shared an example of how they wrote a response letter to their members when it became clear that a subset of them were upset about the state in which their annual conference was to be held because of political tensions in the state. The leader described how they offered a quick, transparent, and thorough response that explained their decision to keep the conference location unchanged. They noted that they received positive responses from their membership — including from some members who adamantly wanted the location moved — for their responsiveness and transparency.

Another leader talked about the need to navigate messaging across cultures and communities with sensitivity, which has led to an institutional culture that includes "a practice of vetting institutional messages with our regional offices to try to get [messaging] right" and ensuring that communication is consistent and respectful.

One leader described how transparent communication about their organization's history was itself a powerful way to demonstrate their commitment to high ethical standards. In this case, the leader talked about the need to acknowledge the history of how their organization accrued its endowment in relation to capitalism and power, and to be clear about how the organization is thoughtful about that history in its current mission and goals:

> There were a lot of people who participated ... people who worked who didn't make a lot of money, and there was extraction of resources that had [negative] impacts on the environment. So, there were broad [sometimes negative] impacts on a lot of people and places [that led to] the accumulation of that fortune, and now that we're spending it, we have an ethical obligation to spend it with that [history] in mind.

The leader explained that this history drives the organization's desire to use the accrued funds to have a positive impact on society.

**Issue Stances (of the Organization)**

As described above, leaders recommend that communication amid challenging circumstances and among stakeholders — both internal and external — be transparent. Taking public stances on issues, however, represents a more fraught communication context.

Leaders were more circumspect when it comes to deciding if, when, and how to make public statements about broader issues, be they social, political, economic, etc.

Some leaders stated that they "don't take public stances on any issues" or "do not generally take strong external positions." But the majority of leaders we spoke with described this communication context as presenting a consistent leadership challenge that requires nuanced decision-making. Looking across these leaders' perspectives, however, one clear practice emerges: being selective. One leader noted that philanthropies should not be issuing statements about "everything under the sun" and should instead make these decisions based on how well the issue fits with the organization's key identity and priorities:

> It's very important to tie everything you say publicly about larger issues back to the work of the foundation. Everything that you say, publicly, should be said for a reason which is clearly tied to the mission of the foundation, not general observations about the state of the society. And I think that restraint itself is ethical.

Another leader described feeling pressure to weigh in on every social and ethical issue of the day. They explained that their organization tries to focus mainly on the issues that directly impact the work they do, saying, "Our orientation, in general, is to resist the claims of external stakeholders for us to articulate our ethical orientation for an issue that just is not related to our business." They added that, internally, these discussions are more complicated but that their organization tries whenever possible to develop responses to ethical issues through their programming. They offered an example:

> We believe medical racism is wrong, and we've got specific programs intended to address the symptoms and causes of medical racism. We don't have an opinion as an institution about whether certain mechanisms ought to or ought not to be implemented. ... We think our role is to hold the higher-order belief and then to make some subsidiary investments to explore the impact of different kinds of interventions.

Another leader echoed these sentiments and explained the process that guides their decision-making on public issue stances:

> We created a checklist, and we run through the checklist for issues. It includes things like: How does this align with our mission, vision, strategic plan? How will our funding partners respond if we do this? Would we likely lose funding partners over this? What is the additive effect of our voice in this conversation? Do we have a unique perspective that we want to add? It's not a golf score where the more checks you have, the less likely we are to say something, but it helps to inform our thinking so that we're thinking about it from different angles. And then we can make that decision as to whether or not we proceed. But it also helps us not water our voice down, because if we sign on to everything, it doesn't mean much of anything.

Authenticity was also identified as a key criterion on which to make these decisions. One leader shared: "[Ethics] comes into play when I'm thinking about how I represent myself and the organization externally, and what we commit to do, or can say we can do, so as not to oversell ourselves in a way that could be perceived as disingenuous or not meeting capabilities." In sum, the leaders felt that decisions to make public issue stances ideally emanate from processes that require introspection, authenticity, selectivity, and strategy.

**Tactics**

Leaders also described a number of granular communication tactics they use to help them maintain higher ethical standards. One leader, for example, noted how their organization holds an all-staff, annual code-of-conduct meeting to communicate the ongoing importance of ethics, which provides a "signal" of their ethical commitments. Another leader said their organization convenes a task force every five years to review their bylaws against evolving practices in nonprofit management. They then seek to align their organization with those practices and communicate these refinements across their staff and stakeholders. Another leader highlighted their annual compensation surveys (which monitor perceptions of pay equity among staff) as being a key internal communication practice that boosts their organization's ethicality.

Last, a subset of leaders spoke about how they develop important messaging. They described a process in which they create first drafts of messages related to ethics and then solicit input from their colleagues during the editing process. They often referred to this as a process that invites consulting but not "creating these things by committee." Said one leader, "My role as the president is to drive that process. And I'm comfortable doing that."

## Committing to Serving a Representative Array of Stakeholders

Overall, leaders shared the perspective that broad demographic representation is a central tenet of modern philanthropic work and that it is inextricably linked to ethics, such that with greater commitment to representation comes higher ethicality. As one leader put it: "[Representation] is not a separate process or a separate thing we do. It's just baked into everything." Leaders described representation as an issue that needs immediate attention within the context of philanthropy and advocacy. Leaders' comments revolved around two main topics: boosting community representativeness among grantees and programming, and also contribute to community-building.

**Action Items:**

- Prioritizing diversity in funding portfolios is seen as an ethical imperative that has transformational potential. Commitment to broad demographic representation can be achieved through methods such as holding open grant calls that are disseminated widely, requiring community impact plans from grantees, and assessing who is representing organizations and who is included in events they help facilitate.
- It is important to make connections with, and contributions to, communities dealing with issues such as health disparities, energy-related economic issues, etc.
- There are challenges associated with effective community-building efforts (e.g., time, staff investment, resources, administrative complexities), but these challenges should be embraced in order to meet the ethical obligations.

### Representation Among Grantees

Many leaders mentioned prioritizing representation (which they defined broadly as regarding racial, ethnic, gender, income, and community-level attributes) in their funding portfolio as an ethical imperative for their organizations and as having transformational potential. One leader, for example, described this transformational potential within the context of economics and power: "Philanthropy is not the most diverse of sectors, but oftentimes the populations we're attempting to serve are very diverse, and so, understanding culture, race, gender, and difference, and all of those things in terms of how you do the work, is to me one of the ethical quandaries of this work. Because in some ways, [what we do] is the redistribution of wealth."

Another leader described this transformational potential as being applied to scientific advancement, explaining, "We think there are ideas and excellence distributed broadly in the population, and if we don't create opportunities for people from a diverse range of backgrounds to become scientists and to achieve a great project through science, we're missing out on enormous opportunities." This leader emphasized their belief that more inclusive grant-making can aid innovation. They explained how, in their experience, providing material support to a more inclusive, diverse array of scientists "gives a sense that they can do great things" and "then they will do great things."

These macro-level comments about the value of expanding representativeness among grantees were widespread. Notably, these same leaders also frequently described how they are seeking this expansion. One method was related to the grant-making process itself:

> [Our grant-making process] starts with the open call format. And then we think about how we disseminate the opportunity. One of the decisions that we made early on is that we would actually make a very active effort — invest staff time — to go to where people are. We have our staff go to various conferences that convene people, especially scientists coming from historically underrepresented backgrounds in science. ... What we do is we have our staff go and speak or host booths. And we answer questions at these conferences, so that there's one-on-one engagement with the scientists coming from diverse backgrounds. We try to design our requests for proposals so that they are relatively lightweight in what we're asking for from scientists. This is particularly important for scientists who are coming from minority-serving institutions because they don't necessarily have the same robust development staff that a Yale or a Harvard may have. And so, what that means is that a lot of these scientists, they really have to do it on their own; they're not getting supplemental support on how to strategize around their proposal. And so we try to help save them some of that time.

Another leader shared that their organization now requires each grantee to detail how they plan to foster demographic and community representativeness:

> As a matter of practice, we insist that every grant contain a diversity, equity, and inclusion plan. And that's not about checking some box; [it's not] about telling us what you believe. I actually don't care much what you believe, but I care a lot about what you're going to do. And these are really plans about what you are going to do in the context of using our money to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion in your field. ...if this is a grant to run a lab, I want to know about who's in your lab, how you recruit people into your lab, and, if you're going to use the grant to run a conference, who you're going to invite and what the panels are going to look like.

In another interview, a leader talked about how their organization requires all grantees to thoroughly describe their profile: "[Grantees must tell us] what the composition of their leadership team and their staff looks like. We would not refuse a first grant to an organization that was not very diverse. But we would not continue funding an organization that didn't change. So, that's something that we track and ask for explicit data about."

Leaders also commonly emphasized the importance of boosting diverse representation within their programming. One leader, for example, expressed the need to continually assess who is representing the organization and who is included in events they help facilitate:

> One of the key strategies is to [ensure] that we have diversity of all kinds … at every level of every program we conduct. Let's say we're having a briefing on Capitol Hill on fill-in-the-blank topic. Have we got people there who are a range of ages and ethnicities? … And we report it that way as we go along. And at year-end, we [see if we] met this mark, that no program failed to meet this criteria. You write it down. You hold yourself to it. You hold other people to it and report it and be proud of it.

While discussing efforts to boost representation among grantees, some leaders emphasized the need to have a well-reasoned plan for handling personal data and protecting the privacy of those whose data is collected and stored. One leader, for example, described how they changed their grant application process to maximize the likelihood of attracting diverse applicants by more carefully considering the issue of privacy and committing to it as an ethical standard. In this case, upholding this commitment can be challenging as it creates negative public interpretations. The leader explained:

> We only ask [for applicants' demographic information] after we promise absolutely to them that we will not use this information for anything but internal processes. One of the things this means is that there are outside groups that would like us to report on the diversity of our grantees, and we won't do it because we promised them. We made the promise that we would not share that data. And these are very well-meaning groups, and they think that we're terrible people because we are hiding the demographics of our grantees. And we just have to live with the fact that they say that in public about us because we've made an ethical commitment to our grantees not to divulge any information, even aggregated information, about their demographics.

**Community-Building**

Beyond boosting representativeness among grantees, many leaders discussed the need to make more connections with, and contributions to, communities dealing with issues such as health disparities and energy-related economic issues. As one leader stated, “It’s not enough to just make a bunch of great grants. We have to strengthen communities, and there are a variety of ways we do that.” One way is to prioritize communities’ needs and perspectives over the organizations’ desires to do something new and exciting. One leader explained:

> [You must] make sure that whatever your focus is meets the needs of the community and doesn’t override the needs of the community just because you can have a ‘great’ idea. But if [your idea] doesn’t actually improve people’s lives, it’s not clear you made a difference. So, one of the core ways that happens is that [you have] a great idea, but when you try to execute it in the community, people literally just don’t want that or it doesn’t serve the actual needs of the community. Nonprofits don’t always represent the community — they provide a service to it. So, sometimes it can create tension because a nonprofit thinks [they’re offering] something good and the community itself doesn’t actually think there’s a value.

The leaders often acknowledged the challenges associated with effective community-building efforts (e.g., time, staff investment, resources, administrative complexities) but suggested that these challenges should be embraced in order to meet the ethical obligations.

One leader, for example, recounted their efforts to build connections with Indigenous communities:

> We’ve had to learn how to fund organizations that are very small. I think one interesting thing we’ve had to innovate is that we fund a lot of indigenous peoples ... and their leadership structure is such that they don’t ever want to formally incorporate as an organization. They don’t believe in organizing that way. And so, we’ve had to learn how to be able to give them money even though they don’t have a legal structure that is convenient for us. So, we learn from them.

Another leader suggested that pursuing representativeness through a social justice frame is risky, and instead advocated for an alternative:

> I think a better framing is a scientific-excellence framing, which is our approach. [This framing reflects how] we think there are ideas and excellence distributed broadly in the population and that if we don't create opportunities for people from a diverse range of backgrounds to become scientists and to achieve great projects in science, we're missing out on enormous opportunities.

Another leader advocated for inclusive and patient approaches to achieving representativeness: "What I try to do is to bring people along ... I feel like my approach by bringing people along has more staying power, whereas the more forceful approach, I think, is a little bit more like a rubber band. You can maybe go a little bit further, but at some point, you're [going to] snap back, and when you snap back, you snap back beyond the starting point. And so, [my approach] may be slow and steady, but I think it stays longer."

## Ethical Challenges & Opportunities

The last section of the report touches on interesting challenges that have arisen, as well as some of the ways in which organizations can lead into the future. Here, we report topics and tactics that were not already addressed above.

**Action Items:**

- Measurement and evaluation of public impact have become increasingly important to organizations, but demonstrating impact can be a challenge. It's important to articulate clear goals with clear metrics for monitoring progress.
- Keep internal stakeholders (employees) in mind. Signaling purpose and values across relationships and communication can create alignment and naturally promote ethics.
- Be reflective and intentional in thinking about community needs. Be responsive to changing community needs and ask important questions.
- Consider emerging challenges such as the use of artificial intelligence (e.g., in grant writing) and how to navigate differences and lead positive change in an increasingly politically polarized world.

### Measuring Impact

Leaders often discussed challenges related to demonstrating impact. One leader explained that measurement and evaluation of public impact has become increasingly important to funders: "[In the last 20 years] that's when you really started seeing more of the giving for impact, and the impact measures entering into philanthropy. Certainly, with foundations that's very much a part of it, the reporting back, the measuring of impact." The challenge, they shared, is tracking how the funds are changing people's lives: "How do you evaluate the effectiveness of a program or the work you're doing? … I think there needs to be more longitudinal studies … when you have a grant that maybe has a year's timeline, follow up for a longer period of time. It can be challenging, as people may change at the organization, but I do think those kinds of longitudinal studies can make a real difference in effective evaluation."

Relatedly, leaders expressed the importance of articulating clear goals with clear metrics for monitoring progress. One leader stated, "What you can't measure, you can't accomplish," and highlighted examples of ways in which their organization makes a commitment to do better and not only tracks but also communicates its progress toward achieving its goals.

Leaders commonly noted how creating mechanisms for monitoring and reporting progress related to clear goals is essential to their success. As one leader stated, "There's always a path forward, but you must keep track. You can't just say you're going to do it and hope that someday it'll happen." Identifying, seeking, and reviewing goals associated with the public good is, for these leaders, essential to acting ethically.

### Internal and External Reflection

Another leader expressed the importance of considering the unique needs of the "often overlooked" internal stakeholders — employees — in this process. By incorporating a transformational culture of value-driven ethics throughout the organization, both employees and community partners can "have buy-in, do good work, have a positive impact, understand the big picture, and are themselves value-driven." They noted that when organizations lead with values — by consistently signaling their purpose and values across relationships and communication — it creates alignment and naturally promotes ethics.

One leader described an all-staff exercise that encourages employees to reflect upon what it means to implement values across the organization. They noted these activities transform the understanding of ethics from a position of "do no harm" in a regulatory manner to a position of "do the most good" that becomes more aspirational and impactful.

Leaders also discussed the need to be more intentional in thinking about community needs. They emphasized the importance of reflecting, responding to changing community needs, and asking important questions. One leader emphasized the importance of providing grace during the process of change and adaptation: “When you launch something quickly, there are going to be some rough edges, and you try to do the best you can.”

Another leader also emphasized the need for reflection and adaptability:

> I’m somewhat pessimistic that you can draft a set of guidelines that gets people to say, ‘Oh, well, now I get it, and therefore I’ll do this differently, because I see it in writing.’ ... It can help at the margins. I think what you need to do is put the right people in place by having the right organizational cultures that you maintain, having the right structures and oversight to keep you on track. It’s not systemic. You have to create this over a multi-layered system. But to do good and avoid [ethical] pitfalls ... it’s a continuous learning process that leads to getting back on track or recognizing where there’s a problem that you didn’t consider before, or taking steps to constantly tack back onto what’s the right path forward. And those norms change over time.

A final point raised was about the issue of being humble. One leader explained, “We don’t have the mantle of ‘Gee, we’re the paragon of ethical behavior!’ We’re all in this trying to learn how to do things better and better, and it’s a struggle. You’re constantly challenging yourself and learning and you go through ‘oops’ moments. We all have to be humble about what we do.”

**Emerging Issues**

Another ethics-related challenge raised by leaders was the issue of artificial intelligence (AI). One leader wondered about the implications of grants written using AI:

> What happens when people use AI to write their grants? Is that ethical? I would argue it totally is [because] nonprofits don’t have a lot of free time. But it’s a thing that’s been popping up a lot as people [ask], ‘What are the implications of AI in human services work?’ ... So, that’s the new on-trend ethics question that’s been popping up ... I have very strong opinions that are different than most people ... I actually think AI could be really great for immature nonprofits ... I think it could be transcending for these nonprofits who aren’t great writers and can’t afford a grant writer.

Another leader raised the issue of navigating differences and leading positive change in a world that is increasingly polarized politically:

> I think the very challenging thing right now is navigating difference. And I don't think that's something that necessarily can be codified … into formal policies. But I think the practice of growing the muscles to do that better is very important. We think about that a lot because we fund work that is about polarization and how to reduce it. And of course, one of the signs of toxic polarization is that you create an 'other,' and that other has attributes that are 'bad.' But a lot of times our grantees do that, too, you know, in the debates between the right and the left or pro or con on a particular issue. And so, we are trying to become more conscious of whether, without meaning to, the way we work, the way we talk, may exacerbate those kinds of tensions. How do we make sure we support the belonging and dignity of everyone, whether we agree with them or not? This is a very fraught area right now.

Other leaders similarly talked about how the value of being nonpartisan is an essential ethical decision for their organization in their grant-making process. Said one leader, "One of our values is kind of a resolute non-partisanship. You can go around the foundation and you can ask, 'What do you think about X, Y, or Z political issue?', and people would have strong points of view. But we don't express that through our grantmaking. What we express through our grantmaking is the notion that certain questions are important and that we need to have good information to deal with them." However, this leader then emphasized that although this value of non-partisanship is important to the ethics of their organization, it might be the exact opposite for a different organization for whom being on one side of a partisan issue might be a central ethical value: "And that's not that [our philanthropies] have different sets of ethics, but we're at different points and places in the system. So, we operate differently."

# METHODOLOGY

The Center for Media Engagement conducted semi-structured video and phone interviews from January through May of 2024 with 14 executives/managers/decision-makers of science philanthropies, advocacy alliances, and foundations. Interviewees were purposively sampled to gather a wide variety of perspectives about the phenomena under study. The sample represents presidents, executive directors, partners, and program officers who were either identified by the funders or through snowball sampling.

Our review of the data was iterative. During the interview process, the interviewer (Dermid) recorded the interviews (with permission), but also took notes on (a) themes that were discussed (e.g., noting when a topic was discussed with interest and enthusiasm and when a topic did not elicit deep responses) and (b) quotes that were memorable or provided a glimpse of emerging ethical practices. After reviewing those notes and quotes, Dudo and Kahlor read through the transcribed raw data, which had been collated into 516 single-spaced pages, several times to also highlight notable quotes. The team then selected the best quotes/excerpts from the data and organized them according to the themes from the interview protocol. The next step was to craft a narrative that centered the words and sentiments of the interviewees (using direct quotes liberally) and weave them together across the guiding themes. The final step was to carefully edit the narrative for clarity and thoroughness and to ensure that it offers a representative view of how these 14 leaders are working to evolve their organizations' ethical practices.

The average age of interviewees was 60 years old (range 42 to 77). Seven of the interviewees identified as female and seven as male. Eight interviewees identified as white, three as Black, one as Asian, one as white and Asian, and one as white and Pacific Islander. One interviewee also identified as Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino. All interviewees reported having graduate degrees (e.g., Ph.D., M.D., J.D., M.S.), and the focal areas of their formal education varied widely and included neuroscience, physics, biology, political science, health/social policy, law, bioethics, urban planning, theology, English, anthropology, and psychology.

Interviewees lead organizations with missions focused on a diverse array of topics (e.g., advancing STEM research, education, social justice and equity, sustainability) and are based in Arizona, Kentucky, Maryland, New York (7), and Washington, D.C. (4).

We developed the protocol for our semi-structured interviews after reading the draft report compiled as part of the convening and then conducting a literature review of relevant peer-reviewed research that examined values and ethics in philanthropic contexts. Interviews were designed to obtain qualitative insight about a subset of topics of specific interest to the funders (described next) and to lay the groundwork for future research focused on ethical practices within the context of science philanthropies, advocacy alliances, and foundations. Readers should not make generalizations from these findings. Prior to conducting interviews, participants affirmed their consent to be interviewed and recorded. This research received approval from the University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board (IRB, #0004965).

The interview protocol prioritized discussion of the following key topics within the specific context of science philanthropies, advocacy alliances, and foundations:

- Managing conflicts of interest (COIs)
- Selecting and managing grantees and awards
- Selecting and managing partnerships with other organizations
- Managing ethics violations
- Communication practices
- Practices and perspectives about serving a diverse array of stakeholders
- Ethical challenges and opportunities

## RESOURCES IDENTIFIED DURING INTERVIEWS

- Science Philanthropy Alliance
- Society for Human Resources Management - Ethics Audits
- Center for Effective Philanthropy

**Codes of Ethics and Conflicts of Interest:**

- University of Cambridge Equality Impact Assessment
- UK Research and Innovation Equality Impact Assessment
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine - COI form template
- NSF Code of Ethics
- Administrators and the Responsible Conduct of Research

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL READING

The following articles offer additional framing for some of the concepts and ideas discussed in this report, including STEM pipeline issues, belonging, and leading by example.


- Barber, P. H., Shapiro, C., Jacobs, M. S., Avilez, L., Brenner, K. I., Cabral, C., ... & Levis-Fitzgerald, M. (2021). Disparities in remote learning faced by first-generation and underrepresented minority students during COVID-19: Insights and opportunities from a remote research experience. *Journal of Microbiology & Biology Education*, 22(1), 10-1128.
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- Carpi, A., Ronan, D. M., Falconer, H. M., & Lents, N. H. (2017). Cultivating minority scientists: Undergraduate research increases self-efficacy and career ambitions for underrepresented students in STEM. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 54(2),169-194.
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- Cimpian, J. R., Kim, T. H., & McDermott, Z. T. (2020). Understanding persistent gender gaps in STEM. *Science*, 368(6497), 1317-1319.
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- Maclean, M., Harvey, C., Yang, R., & Mueller, F. (2021). Elite philanthropy in the United States and United Kingdom in the new age of inequalities. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 23(3), 330-352.
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- Yaffe, T., & Kark, R. (2011). Leading by example: the case of leader OCB. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 96(4), 806.