

FIVE THINGS WE LEARNED FROM DELIVERING THE LEVEL BIPOC GRANTS

REFLECTIONS FROM
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The LEVEL BIPOC Grants offer flexible, operating funding to organizations led by Black people, Indigenous people, and people of colour (BIPOC). This new grant stream was developed after hearing from community that to support work in racial justice, core, flexible funding for BIPOC-led organizations is critical.

For the first time, we tried out new approaches that aim to center relationships and draw on different worldviews. The application process weaved in oral tradition and storytelling by inviting applicants to conversations with staff and advisors instead of written application forms and budget submissions. Below is a summary of reflections from the LEVEL team: Alejandra López Bravo, Abeer Yusuf, and Joey Cheung on what they learned in this process.

#1

THE ACT OF SHARING STORIES HELPED BUILD RELATIONSHIPS, ALLOWING FOR BRAVE CONVERSATIONS AND GREATER TRUST AND ACCOUNTABILITY, BUT IT ALSO EMPHASIZED OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO HONOUR THESE STORIES OF RESILIENCE, PAIN, AND JOY BY SHIFTING POWER IN WAYS THAT CAN MAKE IT EASIER FOR THEM TO DO THEIR WORK.



“...when the people sitting across from us also opened up and shared with us pieces extremely close to their heart, their vulnerabilities, and the reason as to why they do this work and how they hold the glue of their communities, I learned how much responsibility is on our shoulders, and the importance of us being accountable to these communities.”

“This one organization just brought so much humour and talked about different things that it truly made me reflect on why choosing this path for our conversations was so helpful. It allowed for someone—in the middle of a very serious conversation about equity—to give me plant advice on pruning my wilting rubber Ficus. It’s about building relationships as people as opposed to funder/grantee.”

“It was incredibly humbling to be trusted with the gift of stories of struggle, pain, need, strength, solidarity, resilience, collective leadership, accountability, community, movement building and love. I feel strongly accountable to these stories, and responsible to continue unlearning and learning to make a path for these voices and work.”

#2

KEEPING IN OUR MINDS WHO WE ARE ACCOUNTABLE TO, AS INDIVIDUALS BUT ALSO AS AN ORGANIZATION, HELPED TO INFORM AN APPROACH TO GRANTMAKING THAT COULD BETTER CENTER EQUITY AND JUSTICE, FURTHER DEEPENING PERSONAL COMMITMENTS TO ALIGNING THIS WORK WITH PURPOSE.



“In conversation with BIPOC leaders we asked the questions about accountability: Which communities are you accountable to and which communities claim you? What do they wish to be accountable for? I realized as I reflected on those questions for myself that as part of Vancouver Foundation’s transformation work to center equity and justice we should reflect on these questions individually and collectively.”

“My parents are my first community and my marker for all things good, just, right and behaving ethically and with zameer (integrity) in this world. I remain secondly accountable to my own younger self who had (and continues to) have a very innocent outlook on justice and a commitment to ‘doing the right thing’, and I remain accountable to the communities that have welcomed me, on these lands and others, and helped me shape the person I am with the worldviews I have.”



#3

THE OPPORTUNITY TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS WITH ORGANIZATIONS INSTEAD OF ASSESSING WRITTEN APPLICATIONS CREATED VALUABLE SPACE FOR UNDERSTANDING AND LEARNING.



“What surprised me was how varied the experiences were and how much bias I had towards certain people and groups. I am reminded that experiences of racialized folx* are not a monolith through being in conversation with folx that I wouldn’t normally have the opportunity to interact with.”

“I heard from a few organizations that their hopes and dreams in doing this work is to be part of something bigger than themselves, part of a movement that embodies their ancestors’ wisdom and the right to return to their culture and communities, to create spaces and opportunities through this work to unlearn white supremacy and reclaim and return home.”

“Hearing about the diversity within the Black, Indigenous and POC (people of colour) communities reinforced my commitment to continue to learn with an intersectional** lens when advancing racial justice.”

**Folx is an alternative spelling of ‘folks’ that implies the specific inclusion of marginalized groups. Both are gender-neutral and acceptable to use.*

*** To take an Intersectional lens is to consider the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination individuals face due to aspects of their identity such as race, gender identity, sexual orientation, wealth, ability, and more.*

#4

MORE TIME AND CAPACITY COULD HAVE HELPED TO CREATE SPACE FOR MORE AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONS. DESPITE OUR BEST INTENTIONS, CONVERSATIONS SOMETIMES FELT RUSHED OR TRANSACTIONAL AS WE WERE STILL CONSTRAINED BY THE NEED TO GATHER CERTAIN INFORMATION AS PART OF THE APPLICATION PROCESS.



“I was disappointed that we didn’t have more time and capacity to dive into deeper conversations with the applicants, that it still felt transactional at the end of the day.”

“Next time, I would want to be more flexible about covering all the questions and allow a bit more of the conversation to go where the applicant wants to take it.”

“We could’ve called it an interview, not a conversation - because that’s how it played out with the script and all the contextual information we needed to share before and after, and to actually acknowledge that there is a power inequity on who we are and who they are in context of granting.”

#5

ACKNOWLEDGING THE POWER IMBALANCE IS ONE OF MANY ACTIONS WE NEED TO TAKE IN MOVING TOWARDS SHARING POWER.



“The purpose of the oral applications among other things was to build trust and build relationships so naming the power unbalance of being a funder during these conversations was key. Sharing that our intention in doing oral applications was to address some of this power unbalance as well as incorporating different ways of knowing created a better space for truth telling and brave conversations.”

“It was important to me going into these conversations to not take up space and to listen, and respond with as much honesty and intention as possible.”

“The tension about recognizing the power unbalance is not enough as we need to move towards redistribution not only of resources as a philanthropic organization but of power.”
