BUILDING FOR NOW AND THE FUTURE: CAPACITY BUILDING ACROSS THE SUNCOAST

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THE WHY

TO FULFILL THE MISSION OF STRENGTHENING THE EFFORTS OF PEOPLE, ORGANIZATIONS, AND COMMUNITIES, THE PATTERSON FOUNDATION CONTINUALLY LOOKS TO EVOLVE AND BE IMPACTFUL IN ITS OFFERINGS.

The Patterson Foundation (TPF) strengthens the efforts of people, organizations, and communities in the Suncoast region of Florida and beyond. TPF strives to fulfill this mission by understanding how the sector and community continue to evolve and embrace new ideas that address a constantly changing world. One of the ways the foundation works to catalyze efforts toward shared aspirations is through five key actions: connecting, learning, sharing, evolving, and strengthening (CLSES).

In the Suncoast, a litany of adept, nimble, and active funders contribute to nonprofits’ health and long-term sustainability in unique and innovative ways. Taking time to listen, ask questions, and explore builds mutual understanding and helps TPF evolve and strengthen its offerings to best address community needs.

Using TPF’s CLSES model as a guide, conversations were initiated by reaching out to select funders within TPF’s four-county region (Charlotte, DeSoto, Manatee, and Sarasota counties).

To better understand the importance of these conversations and the findings which came from them, we must understand the region and the funders serving in the area.

The nine funders who were a part of these conversations have a combined asset value of more than $1.2 billion and fund in the following counties:
- Charlotte
- DeSoto
- Manatee
- Sarasota

There is some overlap in funding with Pinellas and Hillsborough counties.

The Suncoast region represents over 1 million people and more than 1,000 nonprofit organizations.
KEY FINDINGS:

THE FOLLOWING REPORT OUTLINES IN DETAIL EACH OF THE FIVE KEY FINDINGS THAT EMERGED.

01 DEFINITIONS OF CAPACITY-BUILDING VARY VASTLY

02 COLLABORATION IS KEY BUT CAN BE CONVOLUTED

03 YESTERDAY’S PRACTICES MAY NOT FIT TODAY’S REALITIES

04 FUNDING TYPICALLY FALLS INTO TWO BUCKETS – PEOPLE AND INFRASTRUCTURE

05 ASPIRATION FOR CAPACITY-BUILDING BEYOND THE CHECK
DEFINITIONS OF CAPACITY-BUILDING VARY VASTLY

As we conversed with funders from across the region, we first asked, “How does your organization define capacity-building?” We wanted to ensure we understood the nomenclature funders use within our region.

What was discovered is that the definition of capacity-building varies vastly from funder to funder. One funder may see capacity-building as strictly programmatic, and another may see it as only infrastructure or only in the people realm, or some combination of the aforementioned.

These differing definitions create gaps and miscommunication among funders and, even worse, in the interfacing with nonprofit organizations. Without a deeper understanding of each funder’s definition, it may lead to instances where funders are not sure who is “playing in the sandbox” or what “swim lane” other funders exist in.

WHAT’S OUR DEFINITION?

THROUGH NONPROFIT THRIVABILITY, THE PATTERSON FOUNDATION IS CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR REGIONAL NONPROFITS TO INVEST IN THEMSELVES TO STRENGTHEN THE IMPACT THEIR WORK HAS ON THE LIVES OF THE PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES THEY SERVE.
COLLABORATION IS KEY BUT CAN BE CONVOLUTED

WHEN TPF SEEKS TO STRENGTHEN OUTCOMES WITHIN SHARED ASPIRATIONS, IT LOOKS TO COLLABORATE WITH THE ORGANIZATIONS AND ENTITIES AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE ONGOING WORK IN THAT SPACE.

The third sector encourages funders to be well-versed in the collaborative space, leveraging relationships to strengthen the impact. One funder mentioned the encouraging step foundations in Sarasota have taken over the last few years: Talking.

At TPF, you’ll frequently hear, “Change Happens at the Speed of Trust.” Open communication, especially between funders, is one of the first steps to building trust. Sharing information about an organization’s initiatives, grant cycles, current climates, etc., helps strengthen the funding community.

One funder said, “Our power is not in granting. It is in convening, not competing with other foundations.” Another discussed how their cross-county collaboration helps to better serve nonprofits – addressing the fact that some organizations may have a better relationship with another funder. This certainly does not mean nonprofits can’t get funding from particular foundations. Rather, foundations can aid them by working to forge new connective tissue. A funder pondered, “How do we go farther, faster, together?” And another addressed the issue of, “Are we double dipping?”

A unified approach to communication between funders can lead to a more engaged, invigorated, and connected third sector.

What if funders knew they couldn’t fund a particular aspect of the work but knew exactly who in the community could? A collaborative approach could engage nonprofits in an entirely new way by ensuring they get to the right program or funder through a foundation’s willingness to communicate.
YESTERDAY’S PRACTICES MAY NOT FIT TODAY’S REALITIES

USING IMAGINATIVE EXCELLENCE COMBINED WITH A POSSIBILITY MINDSET, WE DISCOVER FRESH IDEAS.

Oftentimes, funders walk into spaces with the expectation that everything previously done will continue to work. When was the last time we asked the community and partner organizations what they needed? Sometimes the answer is “Not in a really long time.” This way of being may have harmful effects on our nonprofit partners. We may have created a program or funding opportunity that excelled, allowing for transformation and growth for a long time. But those practices may be in dire need of evolution to face an organization’s current circumstances.

One funder told the story of asking a local nonprofit to attend a course they were offering in the capacity-building space. The nonprofit politely said, “We participated three years ago.” This doesn’t mean there is a lack of care from the funding side. Rather, there are a lot of moving parts, tons of turnover, and keeping track of which of the thousands of nonprofits has done what is difficult.

The funding space in Southwest Florida would look different if collaboration and knowledge sharing were mainstays. One funder mentioned how amazing it would be to have a database of nonprofits that funders could reference to see what they have participated in over the years. The logistics of this are most likely unattainable and unsustainable. However, the thought process is one with some merit. We must figure out a way to collaboratively keep a finger on the pulse of our community. Open dialogue, open sharing, and open transfers of knowledge are all ways we can strengthen the offerings to our nonprofits — looking forward together, to new and innovative solutions to our ever-complex world.
One of the strengths of having a diverse array of funders in the region is the unique ideas and practices each brings to the table. In the realm of capacity-building, there are certainly some similarities, but there are also some considerable differences. One of the differences that make capacity-building efforts multi-faceted endeavors is how funders offer opportunities.

On one hand, foundations fund people. Whether that is equipping folks to attend courses and retreats, funding a particular position, or funding consultants for the nonprofit to work with over time, people are one of the main ways foundations are building capacity in the region.

The other bucket which emerged is funding mission-aligned infrastructure. Funders mentioned the backwardness of funding the human element of nonprofits when their building is not operational or their technology is limited. “Why not fund an organization to purchase an air conditioner to build their capacity?” One funder mentioned if they can’t excel in their spaces, their program offerings take a back seat. There are many other ways foundations continue to work with nonprofits and other organizations dedicated to building their capacity. These are but two examples that seemed to carry water across all conversations TPF hosted.

By combining the efforts of people and ensuring we have robust infrastructure, we can achieve greater impact as we move toward community thrivability.
One thing made clear by each funder participating in this endeavor was the need for funding beyond the check. What was brought up numerous times was the need to hold in tension the realities of immediate needs versus long-term solutions. Funders discussed the need for continued support beyond initial contact with an organizational partner. Given an ever-evolving nonprofit landscape and a revolving door of organizational staff, there is a need for consistency regarding programmatic or granting opportunities. Finding ways to be a part of long-term, sustainable solutions past the distribution of checks, courses, etc., is paramount to building a thriving Suncoast region.

These brief findings by no means encompass the entirety of these conversations. There are many nuances to how funders operate that are difficult to put on paper. However, what is unquestionable, is the dedication funders have to strengthen the Suncoast region. As we continue charting a course forward, evolving, and growing, we must remember our why. Ensuring we see the Suncoast region of Southwest Florida flourishing for years to come.
WITH APPRECIATION

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- United Way Suncoast
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