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Workers First: How a Unique Funder Collaboration Is Reimagining Workforce Development

Philip Rojc | March 25, 2021



HOTEL WORKERS STAGE A PROTEST IN SAN FRANCISCO. PHOTO: T POLMANSKI/SHUTTERSTOCK

People in the philanthrosphere often stress the need to fund in a way that surmounts programmatic divides, addressing the common roots of problems that grantees tend to approach in different ways. But the institutional landscape can be slow to change. Take, for instance, the persistent gulf between workforce development strategies and the movement for workers' rights and worker power.

Workforce development, which centers skills and job training, tends to operate from a different position than labor movement work, both practically and ideologically speaking. Where workforce development often means assessing employer needs and preparing workers to fill them, workers' rights organizations start with workers' needs—a livable wage, safe working conditions, paid leave and



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the like—and ask what has to change in terms of employer behavior and regulatory oversight to guarantee them.

While some big foundations (Ford, Kellogg, Irvine and others) fund in both areas, 501(c)(3) support for workers' rights and worker power has long been the province of a [relatively short list](#) of mainstream foundations. Workforce development's typically training-based programming, on the other hand, draws on diverse support from foundations, corporations and individual donors—with public funding dwarfing anything philanthropy brings to the table.

Given that landscape, it's pretty rare to see workforce development and worker power addressed in unison, not just by a single foundation, but in a cross-organizational way. That's what makes [ReWork the Bay](#) stand out. Operating in California's Bay Area and hosted by the San Francisco Foundation (TSFF), ReWork the Bay covers many bases, including pooled funding, collaborative learning and support for specific projects. But its North Star is centering the region's low-wage workers and seeking workforce development opportunities, but with a worker-power ethos.

"It's ahead of the curve, the way it's being figured out. But there's also a lot to learn," said Jidan Terry-Koon, director of TSFF's People Pathway, which funds to advance equitable economic security in the region. Terry-Koon coordinates with Rob Hope, ReWork's director, to keep this modest but innovative outfit on the cutting edge. It's a model that offers a glimpse at what the future of philanthropy in the world of work might look like.

Origins and a crossroads

ReWork the Bay traces its origins back to 2004, when a group of local workforce funders came together to start a funder table called the Bay Area Workforce Funders Collaborative. The goal back then was to increase collaboration between funders, primarily around the industry-focused strategies typical of workforce development. TSFF took the lead in convening the original funding partners. The funder table also enjoyed some public-sector support courtesy of California's Employment Development Department, a revenue source that ReWork in its current iteration does not draw upon.

The collaborative continued its work through the 2008 recession and its aftermath, events that shook up the national workforce field and prompted the passage of the federal government's current workforce development legislation, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

But around 2017, Hope told me, the collaborative was at a crossroads. "They started to see there was some level of disengagement from funders at the table, and interest in revisiting the purpose and structure of the collaborative," he said.

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“The funders were interested in incorporating systems change rather than direct service. Since all the funders were already funding direct services [separately from the collaborative], the value of a pooled grantmaking fund was less clear.”

Program Associate,
Grantmaking
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Inatai Foundation -
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By the time Hope joined ReWork around 2018, the collaborative was engaged in what he described as a “robust process of working with current funder members and others to get a clearer sense of how to add value.” From that process, ReWork the Bay in its current form was born.

Senior Staff Attorney,
Immigrant Justice

Asian Law Caucus -
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Senior Staff Attorney,
Immigrant Justice

Asian Law Caucus -
San Francisco, CA

Centering workers

Today’s funding partners—many of whom signed on during that transitional period—found themselves grappling with several questions. The first was the simple fact that even as the Bay Area’s workforce ecosystem chugged along, outcomes for low-income workers in the region weren’t getting better. In fact, Hope said, they were getting worse.

Chief Development
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A second and related question was how to better promote racial equity in the workforce, especially in a region where vast racial disparities coincide with monumental economic inequality. The third piece, which Hope called “most formative in terms of where we find ourselves now,” was “centering workers,” an unusual step in a field that typically starts with job openings and asks how workers should adapt to fill those positions.

In the lead-up to ReWork’s transition, TSFF was going through an evolution of its own. Though social justice funding has long been part of the community foundation’s DNA, around 2016, it set out in earnest to embrace racial and economic equity as its [guiding principle](#), orienting its programming toward that lens [under the leadership of Fred Blackwell](#).

According to Terry-Koon, whose People Pathway is [one of three main community grantmaking programs](#) at the foundation, “Being able to host ReWork the Bay is a strategically symbiotic relationship” that goes beyond administrative support. TSFF, she said, “takes a primarily power-building and movement-building approach to economic inclusion,” and in conversations with worker organizing groups, the extent of the divide between that ecosystem and the workforce ecosystem became clear. “We need more alliances and coordination with workforce development folks, and we’re trying to share more grantees between the San Francisco Foundation and ReWork.”

Coalition-building

So who are ReWork’s grantees, and who are its current funders? In addition to TSFF, nine other grantmakers currently make up ReWork’s [roster of funder partners](#). Between them, they contribute about \$550,000 a year in pooled funding

to support the initiative's [Equity at Work Council](#), a group of 15 local groups spanning both workforce and worker power strategies. That funding takes the form of general support.

Funders include TSFF, the Walter and Elise Haas Fund and the Y&H Soda Foundation, all three of which were involved in the original funder table before it became ReWork the Bay. The other funders all joined over the past several years, and include the James Irvine Foundation, the Heising-Simons Foundation, the Grove Foundation, the California Wellness Foundation and the Stupski Foundation. Interestingly, there are also two corporate philanthropies backing ReWork: the Genentech Foundation and JPMorgan Chase Global Philanthropies.

Member organizations on the Equity at Work Council include training-focused workforce grantees like JVS, the California Workforce Association, the Building Skills Partnership and NOVAWorks. There are also numerous groups from the worker organizing ecosystem like the California Domestic Workers Coalition, United for Respect and two local chapters of Jobs with Justice. Also on the council are several cross-sector groups like the California EDGE Coalition, Small Business Majority and the Impact America Fund.

From the start, the folks at ReWork made efforts to center the worker organizing component. "While co-creating with grantees and partners, we made sure that the economic justice groups and worker power groups outnumbered other stakeholders," Terry-Koon said. "People organizing low-wage workers are often least heard, so we're trying to put the center of gravity among worker organizing."

Hope added that part of the value of ReWork's model is finding "opportunities to identify people and organizations that operate in the workforce development space, but share values with worker organizing groups," so that rather than working at cross-purposes, "there's this idea of seeing us all as part of a possible coalition on the basis of how we approach our work." For instance, the pandemic era has led to a recognition at ReWork that in many cases, the needs of small businesses can be more aligned with those of underpaid workers than they are distinct. That recognition underpins ReWork's engagement with groups like Small Business Majority.

Diverse funders, including two corporations

On the funding side, a good number of the foundations behind ReWork are already regular labor movement supporters, examples being Irvine, the Walter and Elise Haas Fund and Heising-Simons. Then there are funders like the Grove Foundation, the Los Altos-based philanthropic vehicle of former Intel chairman Andrew Grove and his family. A progressive foundation with interests in democracy and climate, Grove got involved with ReWork in part because of its focus on shifting power.

“I feel ReWork is unique in that we partner with organizations who center workers in their approach and these folks make up the Equity at Work Council,” said Jose Santos, a program officer at Grove. “The pandemic has showed us how organizing can be a powerful force; we have to continue to use the momentum for good to center the voices, power and needs of working people.”

The Genentech Foundation—one of two corporate funders involved—also called attention to ReWork’s power-shifting approach. “I think the strategy—and belief—that really underpins ReWork’s approach is a commitment to shifting the traditional power dynamic that exists between funders and the organizations and communities they want to support,” said Alexandra Horton, a senior program manager at the Genentech Foundation.

It’s quite rare to see a corporate philanthropy support worker power groups, even if it is indirectly through a pooled fund. In fact, the pooled funding structure in this case likely makes it easier for corporate funders to get on board. Like many corporate grantmakers these days, both Genentech and JPMorgan Chase have adopted an equity lens in their giving, and ReWork speaks directly to those concerns. Asked about the unique position its support puts the Genentech Foundation in, Horton said, “The mission of the foundation is focused on diversifying the science and medical fields, and we are open to exploring all paths that could lead to that.”

The Bay Area and beyond

ReWork itself seems keen to explore multiple paths forward. On top of the roughly half-million dollars it grants to its Equity at Work Council annually, ReWork devotes another half-million a year to fund [special projects](#). They include several research and data-centric projects like a partnership with PolicyLink and the National Fund for Workforce Solutions to illuminate racial equity gaps in the Bay Area’s workforce and an effort alongside Working Partnerships USA and Jobs with Justice SF to understand the “future of work” in a way that centers worker perspectives.

Other recent projects include an effort with the Insight Center to reimagine the region’s workforce system through a racial and gender equity lens. There’s also the Bay Area Undocumented Cash Relief Network, which supported COVID-era direct relief initiatives for undocumented immigrants in the area. Finally, Hope also highlighted an ongoing series of funder convenings around a “racial capitalism community of practice,” in which participants dive deep into how American capitalism relies on the exploitation of workers of color. The intent there is to find ways for philanthropy to act, as well as to acknowledge philanthropy’s complicity in those processes.

ReWork’s various projects speak to its intention to model a more cohesive, justice-oriented path forward for workforce philanthropy. The Equity at Work Council has been actively developing recommendations about what a just recovery from COVID should look like, and like Terry-Koon, Hope spoke of ReWork as being on the leading edge of efforts to bridge the workforce/worker power gap.

“There’s this national shift we’re seeing, especially in places with progressive politics,” he said, pointing to “a growing recognition that this notion of a skills gap is not the right way to think about economic mobility,” and that the majority of jobs being “created” these days do not offer sustainable paths to economic security.

An updated approach to workforce development is certainly warranted. But the question is whether more integrative efforts like ReWork can catch on in places with less progressive politics than the Bay Area. If they do, it’ll largely be because local grantmakers make it happen.

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