





Due-Diligence Guide to Support Systems-Change Leaders

In our article “[How Philanthropy Can Support Systems-Change Leaders](#),” we explore how traditional due diligence, typically designed to assess direct service programs, is a poor fit for actors that serve as nerve centers of systems-change efforts. In this companion resource, we share an alternative due-diligence approach tailored to work that is evolving and adaptive in nature. It is anchored in the **four assets, or “superpowers,” we have found critical to doing this sort of work well.**

Four “superpowers” critical to systems-change work

 <p>DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEM AND ECOSYSTEM</p>	 <p>VISION FOR EQUITABLE AND DURABLE POPULATION- LEVEL CHANGE</p>	 <p>AN ORGANIZER'S MINDSET</p>	 <p>TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS AND CREDIBILITY WITH THE ACTORS REQUIRED TO ACHIEVE CHANGE</p>
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Source: The Bridgespan Group

To help funders discern how potential grantees embody these assets, we offer **specific questions to ask these actors and other associated stakeholders**.¹ The goal is not to assess against a rigid benchmark but to inform where investment can be most helpful. Additionally, these guiding questions can also serve as a developmental framework funders can use to support organizations in building these assets over time.

How to use this guide

In addition to input from the potential grantee, this due-diligence process also relies on **perspectives from a cross section of stakeholders**, such as direct service providers, systems leaders, peer funders, community leaders, organizers, journalists, and academics. To develop your outreach list, consider asking current grantees in the space with whom they are also working. To mitigate bias, intentionally engage diverse points of view, including potential critics as well as identity-based organizations and grassroots efforts.

This guide is most useful when the funder holds **authentic relationships with these stakeholders**. While stark power imbalances often pose significant barriers to honesty between grantmakers and the change makers they engage, overcoming these divides to forge strong, authentic connections is critical to gleaning candid information and seeing the full picture. Part of the work of that dialogue for funders includes not only

¹ Adapted from Co-Impact’s “How to Apply” and builds on Bridgespan’s “Field Diagnostic Tool: Assessing a Field’s Progression” and *Field-Building for Population-Level Change*.

gathering information but being responsive to feedback raised. We see these due-diligence conversations as an opportunity to nurture and deepen relationships and trust—setting the stage for meaningfully sharing decision-making power should the grant come to fruition.

In issue areas that do not yet have clear actors doing this kind of work, funders can invest in and cultivate these assets. In these instances, funders can use this guide to assess assets already in place and opportunities to support further development. Due to [race-based barriers to capital](#), there is a particularly critical need for philanthropy to source and fund nonprofit leaders of color with ambitions for doing this sort of transformative work. They are often proximate to the problem and distinctly positioned to advance change.

The following pages describe each asset and pose key questions to ask potential grantees and other stakeholders. These questions can help funders discern where investments could be best applied as well as provide guidance on areas for further development.



Deep understanding of the problem and ecosystem

In-depth knowledge of the context, systems and structures, and dynamics that perpetuate the problem, as well as other actors devoted to solving it, enables the leader and organization or coalition to focus on critical needs and opportunities.

Ask potential grantee

- What do we know about the nature of the problem that needs to be solved? What systems, structures, and other factors (e.g., social, political) enable the problem to persist?
- Who is most affected by the problem? Who is the least well-served by actors working to solve the problem?
- Who are the key actors currently working to solve the problem?
- Who are the actors that hold power, and how do they view the problem?
- What are the most critical barriers or needs and opportunities?
- What is the state of infrastructure in the fields and movements devoted to the problem?
- What funding needs exist in the ecosystem for durable systems change to occur?

Ask other stakeholders

- Same as above. (This offers a sense of how their understanding supports or differs from that of the potential grantee.)



Vision for equitable and durable population-level change

The vision recognizes that such change requires centering communities of color and other marginalized populations in all efforts as well as transforming the systems and structures that perpetuate the problem and disparities in outcomes. As John A. Powell, director of the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley, asserts in his theory of targeted universalism, there is no chance of achieving equitable population-level change without designing solutions that serve the most marginalized.²

Ask potential grantee

- What is your vision for what durable, systemic population-level change looks like for this problem? What role does equity play in this vision?
- To what extent do you believe that other key actors in the ecosystem (fields and movements) are aligned with this vision?³
- What does success look like for your efforts?
- What work should take priority for this vision to come to fruition?
- What role have communities affected by the problem and frontline leaders played in shaping this vision? What role should they play moving forward?

Ask other stakeholders

- What is your vision of what success looks like for the ecosystem? (This offers an opportunity to sense-check a potential grantee's vision.)

² John A. Powell, Stephen Menendian, and Wendy Ake, "Targeted Universalism: Policy & Practice," Othering & Belonging Institute, UC Berkeley, May 8, 2019.

³ Note: A lack of alignment is not necessarily a bad thing. For instance, sometimes a new vision that's grounded in equity and developed with actors proximate to the problem may initially differ markedly from the prevailing point of view in the field.



An organizer's mindset

Effecting durable change requires adaptive efforts across a diverse set of actors. That means these potential grantees need to be able to bring such actors to the table and undertake the often “invisible” but critical work of weaving connections among them and building their capacity. It also requires a learning orientation, continually adapting their point of view and identifying how best to take advantage of the moment, similar to what movement organizers do.

Ask potential grantee

- How do you characterize your role in supporting social change? What is your role vis-à-vis other actors in the field?
- Who are the critical actors that will need to be “at the table” or influenced for durable, equitable population-level change to occur? Why? What assets do they bring?
- How are you investing in the leadership and development of others in the field?
- How will you help bring alignment and coherence across the bodies of work that already exist?

Ask other stakeholders

- Who do you see as the key actors (intermediaries and practitioners) across the ecosystem working to solve this problem? How have they influenced your work?
- When a major development happens that affects your problem (e.g., a new federal policy) who do you look to help define implications and opportunities for your work and fellow actors’?
- How (if at all) has the potential grantee enabled your work?



Trusting relationships and credibility with the actors required to achieve change

The crux of this work is relational. That includes the need for trusted relationships with peers, funders, relevant experts, beneficiaries, and communities served. It is important to recognize the ways that implicit bias as well as [identity-based barriers to capital](#) may sometimes inhibit the ability of leaders of color from developing these relationships with some white actors.

Ask potential grantee

- What relationships and partnerships are already in place, and which ones will you need to develop or invest in further?⁴
 - Why do you have those relationships, and what is the role that these relationships play in the work you are coordinating?
 - What actors will you need to differentially invest time and resources in to engage in this work? Why?
 - How do you hold yourself accountable to other actors across the ecosystem?
- Given the higher-level vantage point of your efforts, how do you keep close to the work on the ground?
 - Who are your go-to relationships or resources to stay close to the experiences in communities?
 - How do you ensure these relationships are bi-directional, and that your efforts are informing and supporting grassroots actors?
- How do you hold yourself accountable to the communities and people disproportionately affected by the problem?

Ask other stakeholders

- Who are your most common collaborators? Who would you like to be? Why?
- How interested (if at all) are you in partnering with the potential grantee moving forward?
 - If limited interest, what would it take to build your interest?
- What is your hope for the potential grantee's work and strategy moving forward?