



# Council for Black Male Success

*A Community Impact Initiative of the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation*

**LESSONS LEARNED**

*April 2020*

 SAINT PAUL  
& MINNESOTA  
FOUNDATION

# Listening & Responding to Community: What We Learned

In 2016, equipped with community insights and quantitative data, the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation committed \$3 million over three years to improve the opportunity landscape and make positive change for Black youth and young men in Saint Paul. The Council for Black Male Success (CBMS), a consortium of organizations serving the African American community, was launched to drive this vital work.

For us, this was a significant first. Never had we invested in an initiative of this size, length, and intensive community engagement. Over three years' time, the lessons learned and impact on us as a philanthropy have been profound.

We listened, learned and grew in innumerable ways. Our assumptions were challenged. There was an awakening to what it truly means to center community, trust community, and follow its lead. We made missteps and course corrected. Truth was spoken and trust built. We exposed unintended harm to the community by philanthropy and then, built bridges. We acknowledged what was achieved in partnership with community and gained a better understanding of what is now possible.

Most importantly, we were inspired by the tremendous wisdom and leadership inherent in our community's Black youth and young men. This has given us boundless hope and optimism for the future.

It is our hope that by sharing our key learnings here, we can help other philanthropies inform and strengthen their community initiatives and help bridge the divide that often exists between funders and the communities we serve.

***What guides our work in the community.***

## **STRATEGIC PILLARS**

1. Inspire generosity.
2. Advocate for equity.
3. Invest in community-led solutions.

## **APPROACH**

### **Informs**

Who informs the work? Whose life experiences help identify priorities and set the agenda?

### **Forms**

Who forms the work? Who manages and executes on the plan of action?

### **Benefits**

Who benefits from the work?  
What outcomes are improved?



## **Invest in a community-centered design and community-driven approach.**

The CBMS initiative was founded on the premise of trusting the community to identify its key issues and define its own solutions and strategies. Our board of directors gave Foundation staff the authority and autonomy to explore what that looked like in practice. By being open and willing to a new approach, the CBMS initiative took the Foundation on a transformative journey of listening, learning and responding to a community-centered design and community-driven approach to improve the opportunity landscape for Black youth and young men in Saint Paul.

02

### **Take the time to build relationships and trust.**

Plan for the time and space needed – ideally, as defined by community – from the start of the project to build strong relationships and trust between the community leaders themselves and between foundation staff and community leaders. We underestimated the amount of time needed and learned that this process cannot be rushed. Our experience suggests it takes a year or more for a cohort to build relationships and trust, develop shared understanding and agreements, and gain consensus around roles, decision-making and what it means to be a part of a multi-year cohort.

03

### **Set community leaders up for success.**

While the CBMS was community-led and community-driven from the start, we did not initially fully consider how the participants' diversity in size, scale, experience and place in the natural continuum of organizational growth would impact their ability to function as a collective from Day 1. We learned that these differences impacted their readiness to collaboratively share ownership, share power and drive the initiative. For the Council leaders themselves, we learned that strong structures and processes are essential to identifying where leadership skills training is needed and the importance of investing in the time and resources to provide this type of support. We also learned the importance of valuing community leaders' time and expertise. We awarded participation grants to the nonprofit employers of CBMS members to fairly compensate them for their commitment of staff time to the initiative. This investment was also a good-faith demonstration of how we valued each leader's critical contributions to the work.

04

### **Acknowledge the impacts of historical trauma and promote healing.**

The legacy of historical trauma impacts nearly every facet of the lived experiences of Black Americans. CBMS leaders underscored the impacts of this trauma not only on the Black youth and young men they work with through their nonprofits, but on each of them, as well. But before this dialogue surfaced, the engagement process was profoundly clouded by misunderstandings and triggered emotions. We learned that the importance of accommodating difficult conversations with empathy and respect helped us develop relationships that eventually built trust. This enabled us to better understand and discuss the impacts of historical trauma on the leaders in the room, so an atmosphere of compassion, healing and understanding could grow.

05

### **Make space for real conversations.**

Engaging the community to uncover the root causes of systemic injustices requires honest, often difficult dialogue and storytelling. If we had it to do again, we would prepare our staff for this process by providing training and recruiting the help of outside experts. The process was at times emotional and triggering. Every CBMS leader brought their whole selves and histories, which made for real and rich ideation and planning grounded in lived experiences. We learned that as funders, we should expect, welcome and make space for these very real conversations.

06

### **Realize the consequences of the competitive culture of philanthropy.**

By its very design, foundations operate in a power dynamic that puts nonprofits in competition for grants and support. This competition has fostered varying degrees of mistrust. Despite this competitive landscape, we held an expectation that CBMS leaders could immediately work together in harmony, trust and shared leadership. We realized that it was misguided and unfair for us to expect community to act differently within the conditions we created. The question then became: how do we create the conditions for community leaders to thrive and drive the initiative together? This reframing helped the Foundation's staff support the Council's natural continuum of growth and success.

07

### **Recognize when "traditional" will not work.**

Very quickly, we learned that our traditional approach to funding and impact expectations was not going to work with the CBMS initiative. Specifically, we realized that solving a systemic problem of this magnitude — the economic and educational disparities for Black youth and men in Saint Paul — in 3 years was not only unrealistic, but impossible. We learned that by reframing our approach, we were able to support the critical first legs of a journey to improve the opportunity landscape for Black youth and men in Saint Paul.

08

### **Set the table for success.**

As funders, we learned that the best thing we can do is follow community's lead, get out of their way and be nimble and flexible in our support. We learned to listen deeply, respond and support the core operations. That way, community leaders are better able to focus their energies on the positive results we all want to see.

09

### **Engage an external partner.**

We learned that while there was facilitation support for convenings, the CBMS initiative would have benefited from having a backbone organization leading from outside the Foundation. In retrospect, our staff was stretched at or beyond capacity to manage an initiative of this magnitude.

10

### **Be open to new ways of assessing impact.**

Measuring social change impact is tricky and often elusive. We learned that the funder's evaluation needs are sometimes in conflict with the community's needs and perceptions. By being open and collaborative when discussing and defining impact and measurement, then we can truly achieve a community-centered approach.

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