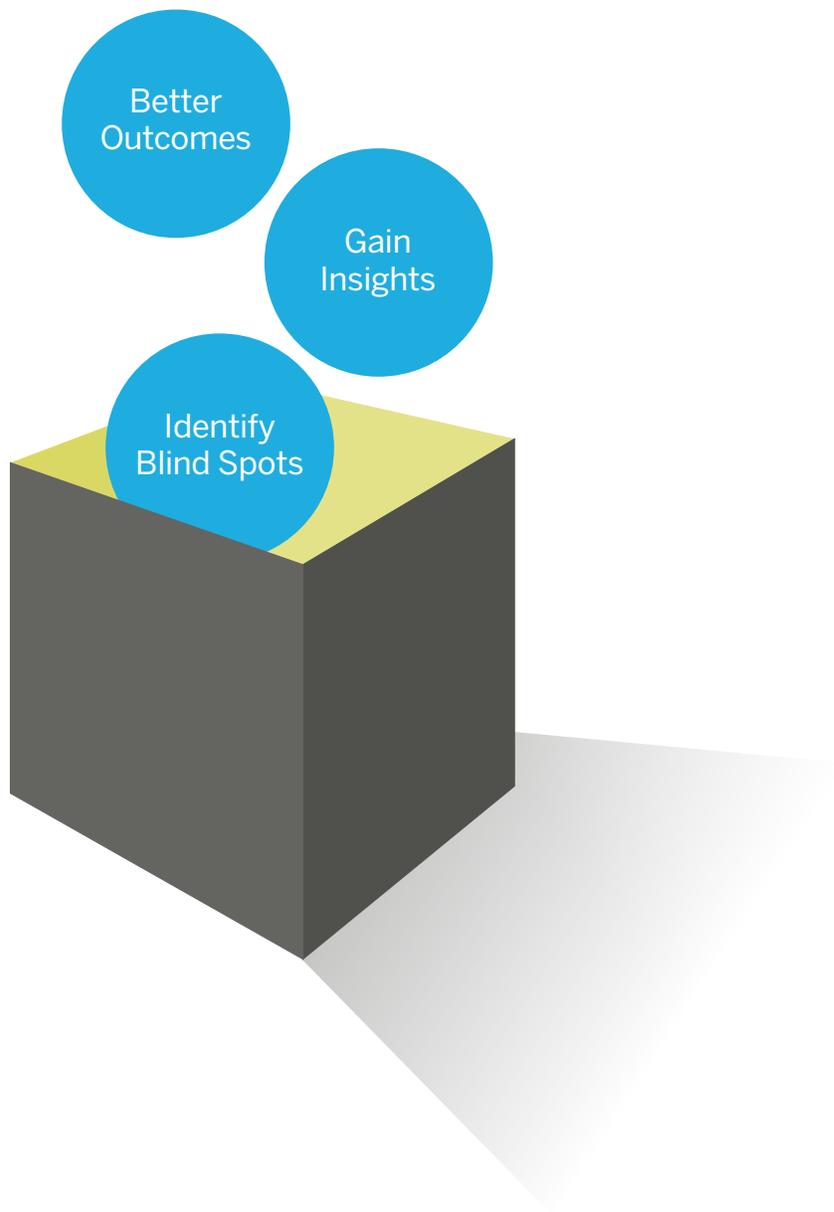


# Why Building Reflective Practice in Philanthropy Matters



Philanthropy's  
Reflective Practices:  
a project to help you  
build what you bring  
to your work

**You choose to work in philanthropy because you have a passion, competence and commitment related to a place or field or issue. Keeping a deep connection to your field, place or issue is your first discipline. How you put your content expertise to work is your second discipline.**

We've talked to hundreds of philanthropy practitioners and it is not the *what* but the *how* of the work that keeps them up at night. For example:

- **Saying yes:** How do I cocreate proposals with applicants? How do I get beyond the ritual of stamping each other's passports and then continuing on as citizens of separate countries?
- **Saying no:** How do I say no to a good idea with grace and clarity?
- **Working as a boundary crosser:** How do I navigate the boundaries of my organization and those of partners to share new insights and different perspectives?
- **Managing the volatility of innovation:** How do I navigate norms and orthodoxies when I'm introducing or being introduced to new ideas? How do I know when to lead and when to follow?
- **Checking implicit bias:** How do I help myself and my organization stay alert to racial, gender, sexual orientation and age biases during scans, strategies and day-to-day conversations?
- **Managing adulation and contempt:** How can grantees and grant seekers trust me as a reliable partner? Should I trust them? How do I manage the projections that inevitably come with power imbalances?

These are what Don Schön, MIT philosopher and educator, called challenges that might require content knowledge but don't have technical, "high-road" solutions. He observed that most important work takes place in the lowland or **"swampiness" of challenges that have no one right answer and require self-knowledge, collaboration and relationships to develop solutions.**

Ellen Schall, a senior presidential fellow at New York University, reminds us that a practitioner's effectiveness is tied to learning to love the messiness of lowland work. Building on her work with public and nonprofit leaders, she encourages us to develop reflective practices that lead to explicit theories of action that can be tested, adjusted and shared with others to strengthen the *how* of work across a field.

“Gain new insights and ideas when learning alongside peers.”

“Be candid about ‘learning out loud’ and thereby inspire greater trust.”

“Have less anger and frustration, which allows me to see good intentions in others to solve problems in service of mission.”

## Why philanthropy practitioners say they use reflective practices ...

“When there’s a lot going on, I can find myself reacting too quickly, overreacting, spinning or procrastinating. Taking the time for reflective practice brings greater intentionality and ultimately more productive and fulfilling outcomes.”

“Negotiate conflict more effectively.”

“Identify blind spots.”

“Spot my patterns, both positive and negative, and course correct when necessary.”

“Clarify for myself (and others) what assumptions I was working under and actually test those assumptions.”

“Be able to listen to others more deeply.”

“In my old practice, I’d endure a difficult conversation, go away, calm down, find clarity, then return to the person and have a better conversation. Now I practice stopping difficult conversations midstream, ask for a moment to figure out what’s going on, or even ask that of myself and who I’m talking to in the moment. I look for better ways to show up now, rather than the next day after the conversation. It’s not easy but I’m getting there, and it saves a lot of time and energy.”

## There are dozens of practices that can serve as mental bridges to get you from where you are stuck to better outcomes.

Here are four core practices frequently used by practitioners in philanthropy. Even though these four practices have distinguishing characteristics, you'll quickly see how valuable it is to mix and match methods to construct the strongest and most elegant supporting structure you need for any situation.

### **Discover Your Role**

How do you create roles that match what's needed in the moment? You work from an organizational/positional role, but you meet most challenges on the job by occupying situational roles that match the needs at hand. You bring who you are to each role. We offer ways to help you construct the right role and bring your unique skills and traits to it as a creative, reflective practice.

### **Practice Presence**

How do you train your mind and body to pay full attention and respond to situations purposefully? Practitioners shared several methods that help them slow down, press the pause button on reactive orders from the brain, and pay deeper attention to what is happening around them. You'll find several methods—paying attention to hot buttons and pinches, leaning into a consultative stance, and using a contemplative practice—to aid active listening to yourself and others.

### **Let the Right Brain In**

What can help you observe and make sense of contentious conversations or complex situations? Of course, analysis and data points are important for solving problems. They are philanthropy's go-to left-brain tools. When you need to surface assumptions, feelings or opposing thoughts, you may need to invite the right brain into the discussion. We've pulled together a few reflective practices for balancing left- and right-brain thinking during difficult dialogues.

### **Enlist Peers**

Have you ever shadowed a colleague on a site visit? Or gained insight into a longstanding dilemma by talking to a colleague while waiting for a delayed flight or stuck together in traffic? Have you had a hallway conversation at a conference that was so good it paid for the registration fee? Curious about how to make this a practice when there is no site visit, delayed vehicle or conference coming up? Learn how to construct a bridge from a dilemma to a learning opportunity with peers in as little as 20 minutes.

You can download a PDF about each one or read our guide about all of them at [www.reflectivepractices.org](http://www.reflectivepractices.org).

## Let's Make Reflective Practice Philanthropy's Second Discipline

**The times demand it.** The Army phrase of living in a VUCA world—volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity—has reappeared in leadership training lexicon for good reason. Reflective practices can help you work more effectively in constantly shifting environments.

**The science supports it.** Research on the neuroplasticity of the brain over one's lifetime has produced a plethora of popular and scholarly research that confirms what we have known all along. We don't have to stop growing our mindset after childhood. As adults, we need reflective practice methods for continuously learning how to create authentic connections with others to make a difference in the world.

**Other sectors do it.** In health, education, social services and the law, you can find programs to help practitioners use reflective practice methods to achieve better outcomes with their colleagues and clients. Leadership training programs are increasingly premised on the value of developing self-knowledge to enable people to better connect and solve problems in rapidly changing environments.

**The wheel doesn't have to be reinvented to learn it.** You already use reflective practices. By making it more explicit, you'll discover what you already know and what else you want to learn. You can find an approach that matches your strengths and you can find ones that will stretch you. Your best teachers may be your best grantees. In fact, don't go it alone: this is a wonderful way to bring together grantees and foundations for shared learning purposes.

**The unique work of philanthropy requires it.** As funders, you need methods to manage power dynamics, cocreate solutions, see what's missing and what's new, and take risks with money and voice. Philanthropy practitioners leading with transformation goals such as greater diversity, equity and inclusion in a field or inside their organization tell us they use reflective practices to help them dig deep and stay the course as they pilot experiments, encounter "how we've always done it" resistance, and suggest new behaviors that create initial discomfort.

## Get a Good Conversation Going

At the beginning or end of a meeting with your colleagues, grantees and other partners, take 15 minutes to answer one or more of these questions to open up a deeper conversation about reflective practices for the *how* of your work.

### In the Beginning

When you first started this job, what object or image would describe the *how* of your work versus the *what* of your work?

- Instead of an object, you could invite everyone to create metaphors: When I started, I was to my foundation as X is to Y; I was to myself as X is to Y and I was to people in the field as X is to Y.
- Where are you now?
- Where would you like to be?

### Your Hero

Who is your reflective practice hero? Why? What would you like to emulate in your own work?

### One Challenge

What is one challenge you face that your training hasn't prepared you for? What is one reflective practice that might help you work through it?

### Useful Experiences

What experiences (training, on the job, lived, etc.) helped you develop ways to reflect on your practice?

### Assigning Value

In what recent situation has reflective practice proved its return on investment?

### My Go-To

What's your top personal way of reflecting? How has it helped you in philanthropy? Or has it?

### Aha Moment

What was the formative event that made you realize that reflective practice was important?

### Comfort Zone

Are you open or private about reflecting on your practice and why?

### Team Tally

Does your team have a reflective practice mindset? What is it? If not, what are some ideas about how you might introduce reflective practice for your team? Could you imagine suggesting some of the practices in this guide with your own team?

### Culture Check

Does your organization build reflective practices into meetings, feedback and evaluation? How do you imagine your organization might be different if reflective practice was more readily practiced?

### Inside Out

What would it look like if philanthropy embraced reflective practices? For you? For your particular field? For grantees?

## Why This Project?

### In philanthropy, you have two big jobs.

Your **first job** is to build deep knowledge about the *what* of the work that you are supporting. You stay current with new knowledge, find networks for ongoing learning, and grow your expertise.

Your **second job** is to put that expertise into play—the *how* of the work:

- How do you nurture generative thinking amid complicated group dynamics and power differentials?
- How do you keep learning alive among colleagues and partners?
- How do you strategize with others when there is no right answer to guide you?
- How do you contribute to the work of diversity, equity and inclusion in your organization or in a field?

### Philanthropy's Reflective Practices can help you build what you bring to your second job.

Our goal is to learn and share the tools and skills used by practitioners in philanthropy to improve how they work and get to better outcomes in challenging situations.

*PRP Briefs* can help you start talking about the “how” of philanthropic work with colleagues, board members and partners. Each brief includes relevant examples, useful frameworks and an exercise that you can use with your team or partner to build what you bring to the work.

### Want to Learn More?

Read our recent guide, browse posts from philanthropy colleagues or download the other briefs at [www.reflectivepractices.org](http://www.reflectivepractices.org). Sign up to receive new material as it comes online. Want to build reflective practices inside your organization? Contact Jan Jaffe, project leader for Philanthropy's Reflective Practices ([jan@reflectivepractices.org](mailto:jan@reflectivepractices.org)).