

LEVEL 2018 Site Visit Dialogue - Transcript

This is a transcript of a conversation between Abeer Yusuf, Grants Coordinator and Vincent Tom, Learning and Evaluation Coordination that reflects on grantee site visits conducted in 2018. The questions were developed based on the Developmental Evaluation Framework.

This piece has been edited for length and clarity.

1. What do you find is the value in cultivating relationships with grantees in this way i.e. site visits?

Abeer Yusuf: I think it builds relationships, and I personally am very relational in the work that I do, so I find that being able to cultivate relationships and have a conversation person-to-person, not system-to-system, which we can't escape always of course, I recognize that. But being able to have a conversation person-to-person and being able to recognize that for grantees too, to see that we're human beings on the other end who are also constrained by systems, and for us to be able to see that grantees are constrained by systems, I think there's a particular synergy and a particular harmony to that, which you don't get otherwise. You?

Vincent Tom: I want to add to that – I loved that we were in the same space, that we were sharing the same space, that we were able to see each other's faces and read our body language, because I think there's so much to language outside just written content and what you hear with our voices. I think there's so much there of how we're presenting ourselves, how we're showing up in a space, and I think that helps in relationship building. Being able to meet grantees in such a way (i.e. site visits) was so much about understanding where we're coming from, having those really human moments, connecting with one another, that's not just with system-to-system conversations. I think that's something that really jumps out to me as well. There's something very beautiful about being able to connect in a way – recognizing that the power dynamics are always going to be there – there's that humanness to meeting in-person that was incredibly helpful in fostering a better relationship and understanding what we are all doing this work for – what are our drivers and motivations.

2. What are some practical lessons you're taking from these site visits, forward?

VT: I guess to the work that we do, maybe set longer times. So many of our meetings went longer than we anticipated because we were having such great conversations. A piece of that is also making sure that we're not eating up other people's time, so we would plan for and give ourselves more room for a longer conversation. And I think we should bring food. Food was such a communal thing to have – when people offered food to us, so I think it would be cool for us to bring our own stuff like a box of donuts, or Timbits even, anything, like little oranges.

AY: When you break bread with someone, and specially for someone like me who comes from a culture where everything happens around food, the sanctity of breaking bread with someone is a major piece.

3. What does racial equity look like to you? What is your dreamscape?

VT: I want to drop the 'racial' and talk just about equity because I think so much of it intersects with everything. As a queer person of colour, I can't look at racial equity without looking at my "queer" side if you will. I believe it's going into a space and feeling like you don't need to justify your existence; it's not needing to justify your abilities, your experiences, what you bring to the table. Racial equity and equity in general look to me like being able to enter a space and act accordingly and be you, without having to sacrifice something. The dreamscape for me, then, is for young people to be able to walk into spaces and feel that way. I think the work that we're doing is hopefully laying the groundwork for that – is being able to have one less person of colour, one less Indigenous youth be excluded from a space because of their experiences, because maybe it doesn't line up with what other people would consider as useful and/or "valuable". That's my dreamscape – being able to be in a space and not have to justify everything about you to the people that are there.

AY: My dreamscape would be to see leadership being defined in a different way, with a new generation taking up leadership positions. I think especially in the West, we look at leadership and qualities of leadership in a very particular Type-A way which rewards people who are talkative but also people who know how to hold a room. We don't look at quieter folks or people who don't step up, we don't give them that same value. If we truly want to decolonize our work and look at the work we're doing from an equity lens, we need to ask ourselves: What are the other interpretations of leadership? How are we defining leadership? At its very core, it's done very differently in many different cultures and societies.

VT: And this is where I would plug the book, *Quiet* by Susan King. It's a great book!

4. What do you find most challenging to reconcile in this work?

AY: I worry when people only see us as the 'funders' and as the people who have the power to make things change - which we do, in ways that are not necessarily obvious. Sometimes we may look like we're overpromising things that we can't actually give or deliver on, or things that are outside of our control. I worry about that a lot, around what I am telling people. I also recognize that one of my own frustrations being a person of colour on the other side has been, "Yeah okay great, I'm glad you're listening, but what about beyond listening?" So, what can I, as a funder and person of colour, do in this dynamic, beyond listening? But then how do you do that? And how do you do that fast enough and also slow enough?

VT: This is a very difficult question. I do think about this quite a bit. As funders, yes, we are trying to have more authentic conversations. We're trying to humanize the process but at the end of the day, we're funders. We're the system. I am somebody who thinks that the best way to change the system outside of overthrowing it and burning it to the ground, is to change it from within. I'm a strong believer that in order to change something, you've got to know how it works. But I also think, when are we working towards what we think is our ultimate goal, and when are we not? Because we constantly have to ask ourselves that question. We constantly have to say that by doing this project, am I working towards racial equity or am I upholding inequity? That's something I constantly think about. As we do this work, as we do these interviews and site visits, as we talk to grantees, when we ask these questions, when I hold this information and what's been given to me, along with the information I have, I want to be able to use it towards breaking down barriers. I want to make it better and easier for folks who apply for grants or engage with Vancouver Foundation (VF), but I also want to know, where am I not doing that? Where am I upholding the system? How do I find a balance, and is it a balance or is it 75%-25%? What does it look like? how do I ensure I keep my job while also doing that? How do I know where to push in the right places? I think that's the constant struggle for me.

AY: For me, one of the things I struggle with is, not everything in the system is bad. However when you go into community, and when you start facing community, and you try to say, "Well, this is the part of the system that might actually be working", you then have to defend yourself and the system you're working for. That can also be a struggle, because then you're also questioning: "Am I being defensive because I'm feeling raw and it's about my ego, or because [they] don't know?" Not everyone has intimate knowledge about how foundations or CRA requirements work, or how power structures work.

VT: I want to add a piece here because this is very fascinating, what you just mentioned. One of the first things I noticed when I started working at VF, and I've told you a number of times before, is when you enter a space as VF, you suddenly hold power. As people of colour I think, we are to a degree - and I'm speaking on behalf of both of us - we subconsciously or consciously, walk into a space knowing that we're not there in complete control of the narrative. Suddenly walking into a space and holding more power than you're used to, is something very strange. People want to talk to you, people want to know you. There's a shift in power and I think as people of colour, we're not

always necessarily used to that. It just seems like such a weird dynamic to try to fit together in this mold and that just goes to show how dynamic this work can be--not only from the systems level--but from the individual, tensions that we hold being in these roles and having this privilege and power, and knowing how to wield it in a responsible, hopeful, and positive manner.

5. What is your one main takeaway after having spoken to all the grantees?

AY: One thing that I realized is that racial equity doesn't look one way – for me, that was just a thought that I had. Certainly, we're funding one specific form of it: leadership for racialized immigrant, refugee and Indigenous youth. We're working with a very specific subset but even in that subset and considering all the grantees we've spoken to, they're looking at racial equity in many different ways: around their own life experiences, if they themselves as people of colour (or not), how they understand their sector. We also saw applications from the environmental sector, the arts sector, even an Indigenous band. Seeing a variety of people and organizations apply for the same pool of funding but interpret in different ways and what they're getting the youth they work with to work on, is interesting because it also tells me that different folks are embedded in community differently. There is not one way to be in community, and there is not one way to think about racial equity.

VT: To echo what you're saying, the data shows that. All the site visit interview questions and answers that we have, people see and understand racial equity. They don't even use the word racial equity, which to me is the most fascinating thing. The word count, when I search for 'racial equity', is low. People didn't use the word 'racial equity' but they're doing it – they're not naming it, they're doing it. That's my main takeaway, people understand this work, they feel it, they may not use the same language, but it's there, and I think that's the really cool thing to see.

AY: What we've seen is that the demand for racial equity funding is there, and like I said, ours has taken a very specific shape, but we shouldn't be complacent and say that this is the only way to effect it. There are lots of other ways to address the barriers and needs and gaps that are currently not filled.

6. What would you want the grantees you met with to know?

VT: That we were entering those spaces just as nervous. It got easier as we did more of them but at least for me, there was so much thought put into how we were entering that space, how we were trying to lower the barriers, how to balance the funder-grantee relationship. I was worried that we would come off as "funders" and I didn't want that. I didn't want them to see us as "oh, they're just coming to make sure I'm spending the money correctly." I really didn't want that to be how we started our conversations. I really wanted our time together to be about how they are interpreting racial equity, how are they doing this work, what are their challenges, and tensions, so that we can keep doing this work better. I think there's a struggle in being one of the first foundations to do this work. I'll speak for myself here: It's so awkward to talk about racial equity but be a person of colour. I just always felt strange just being Asian and talking about racial equity but not really from my perspective, it was from the Foundation's perspective. It wasn't my personal experiences with equity, and how that played out in my life. It's how racial equity plays out in a dynamic between a funder and a grantee. But I did feel there were human moments where we were able to share some of these things as we got more comfortable with one another. It was really lovely being able to share anecdotal stories about how we've done things in the past, or how we've been on the receiving end of inequity. It really made up for all the worry I had. As much as I think the grantees were preparing and worried, it was the same on my end. So, we're entering into the same space with almost the same mindset: Who are they? what are they about? what do they want to know? I imagine they're asking the same questions.

AY: I hope [grantees] don't think that this is just our job and this is just what we do. This is very different for LEVEL and Vancouver Foundation because we're trying to do something new and different. Having been in the non-profit sector ourselves with whatever community work we've

done; I think it's important to note that what we were doing isn't just coming from the top-down. I want to acknowledge in this interview my boss, Vi because she blazed a lot of trails for me. If she hadn't done the legwork, I wouldn't be able to do the kind of work I'm able to do. It also comes from the stability that she brings to her position as the Director of LEVEL and having been at VF for so long. You know, I said this in the beginning of this interview – how do we do this work fast enough, but also slow enough? I think she's the prime example of that, where it's happening fast enough to recognize that there are some changes that are needed, but also that we need to do this slow enough to recognize what does the process actually need? A site visit is a slower piece, but also one that helps accelerate the work in the larger frame. I want to acknowledge that I wouldn't be able to do this work, be this comfortable, and take the risks or do the kind of work or ask the kind of questions I wanted to ask, if I didn't have her blessing and if she hadn't setup the trail for me to be in this position.

VT: I echo what you feel. I feel like I've been shielded from a lot of the resistance to this type of work. I feel like we just got the permission to be like, 'go, run with it!' I feel a lot of this comes from people who understand this work, who themselves have experienced this work. There's something to be said to have that level of support and being able to just do and learn and come back.

AY: And the fact that senior leaders at VF are not stuck in that binary of: "Well, this is the way things are' and the fact that they are open to explore what we can change. After the site visits, many of the grantees said, "Well this is great, because we don't even usually get to see what the funders look like." The mid-point relationships are usually more transactional and along the lines of "Did you submit your report?" and such. Even just changing the script by having the grants coordinator and the learning and evaluation coordinator going in to visit the grantees – I think it really changes things.