

Getting Real About Participatory Grantmaking

**REFLECTIONS
FROM THE FIELD**

**REPARATIVE
PHILANTHROPY**



**A BOLD
VENTURES
PATHWAY**

Why I'm Writing This

I've been thinking a lot about the guide since we put it out. Not in a "did it land" kind of way, but more in that back-of-your-mind way, where something keeps tapping you on the shoulder, asking if you're really done with it. I'm not. Because what's stayed with me isn't just the writing, it's what's come after.

We set out to write something useful. Something that offered language and clarity around what it means to engage community in grantmaking. Not just to ask for feedback or do what looks participatory from the outside, but to actually name where power sits, where it moves, and what it takes to shift it. And we did that. But putting it into practice surfaced new questions and sharpened old ones.

What does it actually look like when these ideas meet real people, timelines, and tradeoffs?

I've had the privilege to support a few participatory processes since the guide came out. Two of them in particular live at different points on the spectrum. Each had its own structure, its own pressure points, and its own way of trying to center community voice in the face of existing institutional systems. Both were thoughtful. Both were intentional. Neither was perfect, and honestly, that's where things got interesting.

This is me revisiting the guide with new eyes. To reflect out loud and talk through what stretched, what held, and what still needs reworking.

The Community Engagement Spectrum

The original guide was built around a core truth: philanthropy cannot claim to be transformational if the people most affected by its decisions are left out of making them.


We wrote it to bring some clarity to the growing field of participatory grantmaking, which at that point lacked widely shared and consistently applied standards, just a wide range of interpretations. Some funders were and still are taking meaningful steps toward shifting power. Others stopped at inclusion or transparency and calling it enough, calling it “trust based.” We wanted to create something useful for those trying to figure out where they actually stood on that spectrum and where they could stretch next.


The spectrum runs from Closed to Defer to Community.


● **CLOSED** is just what it sounds like. **No engagement.** Decisions are made entirely by the grantmaker.

● **INFORM** is about **transparency.** Communities are made aware of the process, but they do not influence it.

● **CONSULT** goes a **step further.** It creates opportunities for community input, but that input is optional. It can inform decisions, but doesn't have to.

 **INVOLVE** starts to bring **communities more directly into the process**. They have some power to shape the work, even if they are not the final decision-makers.

 **COLLABORATE** means **power is being shared**. Decisions are made together. Community partners are seen as leaders, not just participants.

 **DEFER TO COMMUNITY** is the far end of the spectrum. **Communities drive the process**. Funders implement what the community decides.

The spectrum exists to name what kind of engagement is happening and what kind of power dynamics are at play. It does not tell you what level you *should* be at. But it does ask you to be transparent about where you are and why. There is often a gap between how participatory a process sounds and how it actually functions. And within that gap, community trust is either earned or eroded. Most importantly, we tried to push the conversation beyond relationship-building into power-sharing. Not because relationships are not essential... they are. But because trust without decision-making power still leaves communities in a passive role.

Bringing the Spectrum to Life

After writing the guide, I knew the next step would be to test how it landed when applied in real time. How people placed themselves on the spectrum and how the choices, compromises, and conditions shaped that placement, whether intentionally or not.

This section looks closely at two real examples I helped carry. Both involved trusted community voices. Both aimed to center equity and lived experience. And both lived at different points on the spectrum, sometimes by design and sometimes by constraint. What they shared was a commitment to doing better and a willingness to keep learning. What differed was where decision-making power sat and what the infrastructure allowed.

Example 1: Deep Listening, Partial Power

Position on the spectrum:  Consult, pushing into  Collaborate

This process was part of a broader effort to invest in long-disinvested neighborhoods through two community-led funding tracks around small business and workforce. The funder had already committed to participatory approaches, and a cohort of advisors were recruited to help define issue areas, refine strategy, and review applications.

What we learned

- Nomination-based selection expands who sees themselves in the process.
- Upfront strategy orientation helps bridge program knowledge to systems-level thinking.
- Advisors need clear structure, real influence, and responsive facilitation to build trust.
- Flexibility matters more than polish, deadlines and decisions should move if the work calls for it.

- Power is not binary, sharing it in visible, meaningful ways still makes a difference.
- Decision-making frameworks should be transparent and reinforced throughout to help advisors understand not just where they have influence, but how that influence is used.
- Processes that invite participation must also invest in building the capacity to engage fully, especially when strategic thinking is needed alongside lived experience.

Here's how it worked:

- **Advisors helped define what the funding should prioritize.** Through facilitated workshops, they surfaced root causes, named gaps in current systems, and helped the funder shape two clear focus areas: one for small business development, the other for workforce systems change.
- **They reviewed applications using criteria they helped shape.** Once the RFPs were finalized, advisors received guidance before scoring. This involved context-setting, discussion, and real deliberation.
- **They made funding recommendations.** While the funder held final decision-making power, the advisor group's scores and recommendation list were central to the final determinations.

One of the most critical design choices was the **nomination-based selection** of Advisors. This expanded the circle of participation to include grassroots leaders who might not have otherwise engaged with traditional philanthropic processes. That shift didn't just broaden representation, it brought new applicants into the pipeline, many of whom had never applied to the funder before.

STRATEGY ORIENTATION WAS A MISSING PIECE. Advisors came in with strong programmatic experience, but many were stepping into systems-level grantmaking for the first time. The process asked them to move from practitioner to strategist without always offering the bridge to get there. Future processes should include intentional time to connect lived experience to broader strategy decisions early, and more than once. Not as a one-off training, but as a thread that runs through the work.

STRUCTURE BUILT TRUST. Advisors' input was embedded throughout. And while they didn't hold final authority, the impact of their recommendations was clear and acknowledged. But there's a difference between being heard and being able to shape the outcome. That's where transparency around final decision-making matters. Everyone needs to know what's possible and what's not so energy is directed at what can be moved.

The process also proved how critical **responsiveness and pacing** are. Deadlines were extended. Language was adjusted. Meetings shifted to reflect what Advisors needed to engage fully. That willingness to adapt allowed the process to stay aligned with its purpose without sacrificing integrity. It also meant tradeoffs. Moving slower sometimes meant missing deadlines or stretching capacity but doing so built deeper trust. That trust showed up in the thoughtfulness of deliberations, the breadth of the applicant pool, and the confidence Advisors carried.

In the end, this wasn't just about distributing funds. It was about growing the practice. Community voice shaped the process and expanded its reach. Power wasn't handed over entirely but it was shared with care and intention. That mattered.

Example 2: A Deeper Level of Community Ownership

Position on the Spectrum: Between  Collaborate and  Defer to Community

This second process was the final phase of a multi-year initiative focused on resourcing BIPOC-led and BIPOC-serving arts organizations. It was designed to close out the initiative in a way that honored its original purpose of shifting power and redistributing resources toward communities historically sidelined in grantmaking. From the start, the team committed to embedding community decision-making at the center of the review process.

What we learned:

- Shifting ratios shifts dynamics. Funders as the minority changed how people spoke and listened.
- Open nominations surfaced reviewers who may never have self-selected.
- Naming fixed and flexible parts of the process built legitimacy.
- Scoring was only part of the work. Balancing perspective, proximity, and gaps required deliberation.
- Tension between technical polish and community need is real and it needs to be named.

- Limiting outside knowledge can reduce bias but also narrows context.
- Balance criteria are essential when equity and rigor are both on the table.
- Early pivots made a bigger difference than post-mortem lessons.

Here's how it worked:

- **The committee was selected through an open nomination process.** Partners and grantees were invited to nominate individuals with deep knowledge of arts, culture, and community needs. Final selections aimed to reflect both lived and professional expertise across communities and disciplines.
- **The committee included community members and funders, with funders as the minority.** The committee had eight members total, and only two represented funders. That meant community voices were the majority in every conversation and in every decision.
- **The committee received onboarding, calibration, and scoring support.** Members were trained on the criteria and process, but also encouraged to bring their full perspective into the review.
- **Decisions were made collectively, not unilaterally.** Reviewers debated, refined, and scored. They considered not just alignment but also balance across discipline, geography, and potential impact. They also recommended additional micro grants, which were accepted and implemented by the funder.

What pushed this process toward “defer” wasn’t just the makeup of the room. It was how the room was held. **Funders were outnumbered on purpose.** Six of the eight reviewers were community artists, organizers, nonprofit leaders, people with both lived and professional ties to the work. That alone shifted the center of gravity. No one had to “represent community” because the space already belonged to them.

The open nomination process worked better than expected. People who would have never raised their hand for something like this showed up with sharp insight and lived context. That mattered. Because what’s needed is perspective that would stretch the process beyond the usual metrics and into something that felt like it belonged to the communities being served.

Still, **the outer frame of the process: timeline, funding pool, and application design was already set.** That could have made the whole thing feel symbolic. And for some, it likely did. Coming in after key decisions had already been made can limit how much ownership people feel, especially when the core questions about *what* gets funded and *how* are already answered. It can send a signal, intended or not, that community voice is welcome only after the scaffolding is already in place.

At the same time, **naming those boundaries up front gave the group clarity about where they could lead.** They were asked to shape what was theirs to shape. And they did. But the fact remains: coming in midway meant they inherited a structure they didn't choose. That reality deserves to be acknowledged not as a flaw, but as part of the picture when we talk about power, timing, and the difference between collaboration and true co-creation.

DELIBERATION WAS WHERE EVERYTHING CAME INTO FOCUS. Reviewers didn't just score. They listened. They pushed each other. They sat with uncertainty and tried to weigh both the written word and the bigger picture. And intentionally, they were asked not to bring in outside knowledge. Just the application in front of them.

THAT HELPED REDUCE BIAS BUT IT ALSO NARROWED PERSPECTIVE. Some applications spoke clearly to the criteria. Others didn't. The criteria and rubric were shared early, but even then, the ability to express alignment affected scores. That's where the tension between polish and impact showed up. And that had to be named.

IN FUTURE CYCLES, THE BURDEN SHOULD NOT FALL ON APPLICANTS ALONE. Participatory processes can include upstream investments like narrative coaching, plain-language resources, and check-ins before submission to give all applicants a fairer shot at being seen.

THE COMMITTEE DIDN'T JUST RELY ON NUMBERS. They used balance criteria to ground decisions in equity. That meant looking across discipline, geography, organizational size, and ecosystem gaps. It gave them permission to move with more context and less rigidity. Equity lived in the deliberation, not just the rubric.

AND PERHAPS MOST IMPORTANT: THE EARLY CHOICES SHAPED THE OUTCOMES more than any post-process insight ever could. How the committee was built, how power was shared, how flexibility was communicated those were the real levers.

What Stood Out Across Both

Sitting with these two processes, what keeps circling back for me is that no matter where a project lands on the spectrum, the real work is in how it holds community voice through tension. Not just during the feel-good moments, but when time is tight, stakes are high, and alignment is messy.

What made the work credible wasn't perfection. It was accountability.

In both cases, feedback loops were built in from the start. Advisors and reviewers were regularly brought back into the process to weigh in, recalibrate, and name what wasn't working. That rhythm of check-ins, structured and informal, meant pivots could be made with people, not just in response to them. It turned what could have been a passive role into an active one. **If the goal is authentic participation, then one of the strongest design choices you can make is to build in mechanisms that surface reflection and create space to respond to it. That's what keeps the work honest.**

Clear boundaries built trust, not resentment.

Advisors in the first process understood that they were shaping strategy, not selecting grantees. Reviewers in the second process knew their decisions held weight, but that some structural pieces were already in place before they arrived. **The clarity of roles gave people freedom to lead within what was real.** That transparency, naming where power sits, what is already decided, and what is truly up for influence, is essential. **Too often, vague framing sets people up to feel disempowered. Clarity may not hand over more control, but it does offer more respect.**

Participation required orientation.

Each group brought deep insight to the table, but that didn't mean they entered with shared strategy language. Lived experience is powerful, but even lived experience benefits from structure when applied to systems-level work. What helped was time. Time to explore the criteria, understand tradeoffs, and build context. Giving participants tools, context, and decision space wasn't an extra. It was essential.

Tension wasn't just present, it was productive.


In both efforts, people disagreed. They brought different priorities, questioned assumptions, and challenged each other's perspectives. The work wasn't to erase conflict. It was to hold it responsibly. And that meant creating space for disagreement without rushing decisions, without forcing consensus, and without diminishing dissent.

Some of the most nuanced challenges showed up in the scoring. The criteria and rubric were shared from the beginning, but the ability to express alignment still varied. Some organizations had language and structure that mapped clearly to the ask. Others did not. And that gap often reflected capacity, not quality. If we're serious about equity, then polish can't be the final measure of worth. Balance frameworks helped here. Reviewers used them to weigh scores alongside discipline, geography, organizational size, and ecosystem gaps. It gave the group a shared lens one that didn't replace rigor but widened it.

These kinds of design decisions matter because none of this is neutral. **Every choice, who gets invited, how decisions are framed, what is up for influence and what is already set, reflects values.** These processes are about more than logistics. They are deeply tied to power. Even when the language is measured and the materials are clean, the impact lands in communities where the stakes are real.

What makes participatory processes meaningful is not just where they begin, but how they evolve. That means building in room to pivot. That means treating disagreement as a signal, not noise. That means recognizing that participation without clarity, context, and decision power isn't participation... it's performance. And maybe most of all, it means remembering that this work is always about relationships. Not just the ones between funder and community, but the ones we build with the process itself. The more we make space for reflection, recalibration, and real power-sharing, the more this work can move from good intention to better practice.

And we're still learning. Every process reshapes what we know and how we show up. For Bold Ventures, that means keeping our practice grounded in what we hear, what we see, and what we're willing to shift—together.



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What Gets in the Way

Let's not pretend it's just a matter of good intentions or strong facilitation. Even when everyone at the table is aligned in values, there are real forces that shape how far a participatory process can go and how much people are willing or able to push it.

Predetermined frameworks limit ownership.

When timelines, funding pools, and application structures are set in advance, it narrows the field of influence. Even if community voice is invited in thoughtfully, the message can still land as “we want your input, but only after we’ve made the big calls.” That doesn’t mean it’s not worth doing. But it does mean that power-sharing needs to start earlier or be more clearly scoped, so people aren’t walking into a process they didn’t help build and then asked to take ownership of its outcomes.

Authority without clarity creates confusion.

People can’t meaningfully influence a process if they don’t know where they have power and where they don’t. Too often, facilitators are left to fill in the gaps between intention and infrastructure. If the goal is to collaborate or defer, then naming what’s fixed and what’s flexible becomes non-negotiable.

Polish gets mistaken for readiness.

Application review almost always bumps up against this. Organizations with fewer resources often can’t afford a grant writer or time to fine-tune their narrative. Even with a shared rubric, the ability to express alignment impacts how scores land. If we don’t name that, we risk confusing technical clarity with capacity to lead. Reviewers need the space and the structure to balance that out, which means building in deliberation frameworks that hold rigor without punishing imperfection.

Participation is still shaped by access.


Open nomination processes help, but they’re not a cure-all. People can’t engage meaningfully if they don’t have childcare, paid time, or cultural cues that say “this room is for you.” If equity is the goal, then accessibility has to be designed in from the start, not added on as a goodwill gesture.

Feedback loops stall without dedicated time.

Everyone says they want to be iterative. Few processes build in the space to actually pause, reassess, and course-correct. That doesn't require months of breathing room. But it does require planned checkpoints, facilitation that can flex, and a funder partner willing to sit in uncertainty for a minute.

This work isn't neutral.

Who gets nominated, how decisions get made, what counts as strategy, these are values-based choices. And whether we name it or not, they reflect assumptions about what leadership looks like, who's ready, and what kind of experience counts. If we're not willing to name those assumptions out loud, they'll keep making decisions quietly in the background.



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Closing: Where Do We Go From Here

It's tempting to frame full community control as the end goal. But maybe that's not quite right. Or at least, not fully possible inside the systems we're working to change. **That doesn't mean we abandon the vision.** It means we tell the truth about the conditions we're operating in and stay accountable to the gap between where we are and where we say we want to go.

At Bold Ventures, we don't believe in performative shifts or surface-level change. We believe in power building, in tension holding, in showing our work while we're still figuring it out. Participatory grantmaking isn't a checkbox. It's a practice. A long one. And what we've learned through these processes is that real power-sharing lives in the details: who's in the room, when they're brought in, how decisions get made, and what scaffolding holds it all together.

So, no, full autonomy may not be on the table yet. But meaningful influence is. Structural transparency is. Early design ownership is. **And those things matter.**

The real work ahead isn't about reaching some perfect participatory state. It's about making deliberate, values-aligned choices inside imperfect systems. Choosing depth over optics. Staying with complexity. Listening longer. Naming constraints without being defined by them. That's how we stretch the frame.

The distance between decision-makers and those most impacted won't close in one cycle. But it does close when we stop pretending the process is neutral. When we build for relationship, not just efficiency. When we make equity not just a value on paper, but a lever in the design.

This is the kind of work Bold Ventures shows up for. The messy, honest, still-in-progress kind. We're not here to play it safe. We're here to make space and make change alongside the people closest to the stakes.

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