

The Makings of Phenomenal Foundation Executive Directors

“Fielding a grantee’s budget modification request, discussing with the board chair how to maximize the foundation’s impact, and divvying up responsibilities for this week’s social media posts can often happen in a single day—before lunch!”

An executive director of a small-staffed foundation juggles many roles: strategic grantmaker, convener, collaborator, and, at times, board wrangler, media spokesperson, technical assistance provider, mediator, and the list goes on.

In the **Master Juggler Executive Institute**, our one-of-a-kind program for foundation executive directors, we’ve created a rarified space for these leaders to learn and grow. We’ve also learned a great deal from them about the characteristics and skills that make for phenomenal executive directors—and we hope that these insights may prove helpful to others.

The characteristics described here are both impressive and daunting. They’re a tall order, and, indeed, part of a continual learning journey for even the very best executives. At Exponent Philanthropy, we believe that these skills can be developed, practiced, and honed.

With great thanks to the members of our inaugural Master Juggler cohort for their insights, we present seven characteristics of phenomenal foundation executive directors.



Phenomenal foundation executive directors are the following:

Masterful Communicators

“It’s taken me time to feel comfortable communicating from my heart. For many years, I thought of that as less than professional, but I’m learning that part of being an effective communicator is to deliver authentic messages that often are positioned squarely between the professional and the personal. It can be risky, but it’s also potentially powerful.”

Highly effective foundation executive directors are **clear and confident communicators** in conversations or public speaking roles. They precisely and thoughtfully express ideas; frankly voice their opinions; communicate the why, the purpose, and the vision; and motivate others with their words. They are in touch regularly with board members, grantees, and partners.

They are **skilled listeners and questioners**—whether on a listening tour to learn about a new field of work or talking with a grantee, trustee, or staff member. A wise executive director asks probing questions and guides conversations to help others articulate their goals and move toward new discoveries or solutions.

Exceptional executive directors also are **adept at being quiet, at knowing when not to speak.**

Great People-People

“Both introverts and extroverts can flourish in this capacity by focusing on and staying true to their relationship-building style.”

Phenomenal foundation executive directors have **strong people skills** and **emotional intelligence**. With a deep understanding of the humanness of this work, they are able to bring out the best in others. They are skilled at relationship-building, and are comfortable engaging with others, from fellow funders, to grantees, to community members.

Big-Picture Thinkers Who Can Get Down to Brass Tacks

“Everyone’s opinion definitely needs to be considered, but I have learned now how to get the important decisions acted on and get approvals faster without ruffling feathers. There’s a big difference between the decision to get the roof replaced on the office versus contributing to a small crowdsourcing initiative.”

The most effective foundation executive directors are **mission focused** yet able to translate the big-picture vision into tactical action. They are **doers** with strong time- and project-management skills. As one executive director said, “We must be organized beyond belief.”

Change Managers

“When our founder passed, we were forced to make many decisions—with a mourning board president. I had to tiptoe around the way things were always done and guide our board to tough financial, governance, and leadership decisions. It was incredibly stressful but extremely rewarding to see great results.”

Whether faced with shifting giving priorities, plans to sunset, succession, or a new board chair, outstanding executive directors are **steady guides** on the ever-changing philanthropic landscape. Friction may result when executive directors recognize a need for change before others in the organization do, but, with a **healthy balance of humility and guts**, they take risks and gently drive change.

Self-Aware Leaders

“The Leadership Competencies self-assessment we did at Master Juggler helped me identify my strengths and determine how to better apply them in the context of our organization’s needs.”

Highly effective foundation executive directors **know their strengths and weaknesses**. They notice the power dynamics at play in philanthropy and recognize their role in that dance. Sometimes, they must navigate around the personal and family dynamics of boards and employees, yet they are **clear about their vision** and sensitive to others. They accept themselves for who they are, are humble, and **genuinely desire feedback** for self-improvement. They also know how to draw on others’ resources and talents to fill gaps in their knowledge.

Network Weavers

“I started an e-newsletter to let our outside community know what we are doing and our board to feel more engaged and part of our mission.”

Whether formal collaborators or peer thought partners, the strongest executive directors

deepen the work of their foundations through relationships. They routinely think about the web of connections they are **uniquely positioned to weave** and engage partners who can push one another and move a field forward.

Knowledgeable and Continual Learners

“Probably one of my greatest joys about my role is that it requires me to be a continual learner. That’s such a luxury, but clearly is coupled with responsibility. An important lesson I’ve learned is that I cannot do it all. I must rely on the knowledge, skills, and experiences of others around me. So knowing when to lead and when to rely on others for leadership is something I’ve become increasingly mindful of.”

Phenomenal foundation executive directors are knowledgeable about their field and the workings of philanthropy. Curious, they are committed to learning. They look beyond the daily grind to **discover opportunities**. They actively scan the field, see trends, and find inspiration or new possible approaches. They continually prepare to fill future voids.

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About Exponent Philanthropy

Exponent Philanthropy is a vibrant membership organization that provides resources and valuable connections to help funders make the most of the minutes they have and the dollars they give.

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