Understanding Power & Privilege is a journey, not a destination.

UNDERSTANDING POWER AND PRIVILEGE IN THE EQUITY ERA

For organizations tackling Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB), the issue of “power and privilege” can be challenging in order for historically underrepresented people to embrace their power in decision making while continuing to engage all stakeholders regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, ability, or economic background.

**Shifting Demographics:** The U.S. population is much more racially and ethnically diverse in the past decade according to data from the 2021 U.S. Census Bureau. The non-Hispanic white population nationwide got smaller, shrinking from 196 million in 2010 to 191 million in 2020, representing a decline from 63.7% of the country's population in 2010 to 57.8% in 2020.

For several decades, both private companies and nonprofit groups have worked to make workplace and volunteer opportunities more inclusive and equitable by moving beyond quotas and looking at organizational culture. The #MeToo movement, launched in 2017, renewed focus on gender equity in the workplace. Similarly, the #BlackLivesMatter social justice protests during the summer of 2020 brought a new urgency to DEIB according to Cost of Inequity, a survey by Business Insider.

Meanwhile, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) professionals know that Millennials and Generation Z want to work for companies that reflect their values such as environmental sustainability, diversity and inclusion, and income equality (2020 Deloitte Global Millennial Survey). Employee turnover is reduced by 57% for employees actively engaged in company giving and volunteering efforts (2018 Benevity Engagement Study). Companies that earn a reputation for being a place where everyone is seen, heard, and valued may not have to worry about the Great Resignation (2021 Wharton Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Practices).
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Volunteer and Employee Engagement: At Full Circle Fund (FCF), individuals from the private, public, and nonprofit sectors volunteer with local nonprofit leaders in four to six month skills-based volunteer engagements, helping high-impact nonprofit organizations develop solutions for communities creating sustainable social change. FCF also works closely with CSR professionals to leverage their employees’ professional skills and experience to collaborate with nonprofits to develop strategies, unlock growth opportunities, and scale current and new ways to ultimately fulfill their missions.

In collaboration with George Aye, co-founder of Greater Good Studio, FCF pioneered a new training workshop in 2019 to help volunteer Members reflect on how issues of power and privilege are present in their personal and professional lives and how it shows up in their interactions with workmates, families, and nonprofit volunteer engagement.

In 2021, FCF conducted a community-based redesign of the training. The results reflect how individuals and nonprofits can optimize their shared professional skills, as well as their lived and learned experiences, to help build more resilient community-based organizations. Design team members, representing a diverse set of community stakeholders, conducted interviews with nonprofit leaders, learning how issues of power and privilege show up in the interactions between volunteers, nonprofit staff, and beneficiaries—and what kinds of roadblocks they cause that prevent productive and equitable partnerships.

Many of the key learnings from the training can be applied to almost any volunteer management program or work setting, as well as personal interactions for individuals and organizations looking to advance their DEIB goals.
Building on Personal Identity

The FCF design team also spoke with corporate DEIB specialists to understand the gaps in current training for corporate employees. The team refreshed the FCF training around the themes and trends identified. Among the key learnings is that DEIB, and by extension understanding power and privilege, is a journey—not a destination—built on trust and interpersonal relationships.

While corporate training programs typically focus on unconscious bias as the cornerstone of their DEIB training, the FCF workshop kicks off the training talking about identity. Using the uniqueness of our identities as the foundation, trainees explore how aspects of their identities affect the way power and privilege show up in their lives. Our identities are shaped by our perceptions of ourselves—and our perceptions of other people as well as how nonprofits perceive volunteers. FCF then uses personal identity as a foundation to introduce specific ways different parts of an individual’s identity show up in engagements with nonprofit organizations.

For example, in corporate culture there is pressure for leaders to enter meetings as experts and make quick decisions. Our volunteers, many of whom lead teams of their own, may be the most experienced marketer or sales leader on their nonprofit volunteer team, but it’s unlikely they deeply understand the community their nonprofit partner is serving. The Power & Privilege training helps volunteers increase their awareness of these knowledge gaps to pause, listen, and ask more questions—and ultimately increase trust and project impact. This encourages corporate leaders to use the same kind of onboarding process they apply to other business partnerships to their nonprofits partnerships by coming to the table to learn about the heart of the issue before determining if and how they can contribute to solving it.
What is Identity? Both how we view ourselves and how others view us shapes the power and privilege we hold and wield. In professional settings, including skills-based volunteering, our identities are shaped by our employer name, job title, work expertise, or educational achievements. As we collaborate with others, we may feel more comfortable sharing parts of our personal identity and life experience such as sexual orientation, working as a female in a male dominated industry, or managing a unnoticeable chronic health condition. All of these shape our identities, which ultimately shape how we see and interact with others.

The same is true for volunteer teams, as each individual brings their own elements of identity into every interaction. In some cases, an individual may not speak out when there are power or privilege dynamics happening. We must recognize and respect that both lived and learned diverse experiences can bring a variety of solutions to any challenge. It's about sharing decision making influence and power.

What is Power? Simply put, power is the ability to effect change, according to *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Power exists in every relationship. Once we know how power operates, we can work to build trust. Understanding the inherent power dynamic that our identity brings (with title, education, skills, etc.) can create unintended impact (fear, tension, alertness, etc.) in pro bono volunteer relationships or workplace culture is key to recognizing privilege.

What is Privilege? Privilege is a benefit or advantage that an individual or group of people have over other people in a society. Privilege includes parts of our identity that work either for or against us. The more privilege a person has, the more change that person can affect. Consider how companies invest millions of dollars to infuse resilience, knowledge, solving complex problems, innovation, trust, and shared values into their workplace culture. Much like power, we can neither own it nor claim it, but we still have it.
UNDERSTANDING POWER DYNAMICS

Learning about the ways power and privilege show up in our interactions is a journey, not a destination. It's about building a bridge of trust to work effectively together. When volunteers collaborate with nonprofits, they bring their professional network and access to resources into the nonprofit relationships, which offer tremendous opportunities. Nonprofit leaders are looking to implement new ideas and best practices from the business sector for a range of projects such as developing short- and long-term strategic plans, diversifying revenue sources, advancing digital transformation, creating marketing campaigns, and more.

But there are often very real reasons that nonprofits have not yet implemented solutions volunteers might suggest. For example, lack of resourcing or infrastructure capacity, and conflicts of interest with other organizational or even beneficiary needs. For volunteers, it is important to recognize and respect that nonprofit leaders are both subject matter experts on their communities and organizational experts on their resources. They work very closely with the communities they serve. This is particularly important to consider when engaging with organizations providing direct service to historically marginalized groups such as women, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).

Volunteers can best contribute by listening to nonprofits about what works—and doesn't work—for different nonprofits. Understanding the inherent power dynamic that volunteers bring—titles, access to funding, companies—charges and impacts the relationships. Adopting a curiosity-first mindset can provide a more mutually beneficial experience for both volunteers and nonprofits. A volunteer's self-awareness about the assumptions they bring to the experience is key. Volunteers often find that nonprofit staff have as much, if not more, expertise about a business or technical issue but nonprofits simply don't have the resources to fully implement every idea. So the best solutions must be streamlined for the reality of limited resources.

In both volunteer and work settings, consider something you or the other person could have done in a written or verbal situation to acknowledge or change the power dynamic. Many times it can be as simple as asking someone what they think about an idea. And sometimes it is acceptable to say "I don't know" when asked a direct question, especially if you are in a position of power. How we empower others, the outcome and impact, can be greater when we make space to engage others in more meaningful ways. Simply put, power shifts when we listen to learn, instead of listening to respond.
FIVE BENCHMARKS FROM PERCEPTIONS TO PRACTICE

Power and privilege can be hard to recognize, because they’re not tangible. They are not a dashboard, not metrics, not a pie chart. Recognizing power and privilege requires personal reflection using five benchmarks from Perceptions to Practice:

● **Recognize Perceptions:** Volunteers and work colleagues must recognize systemic and racial inequity as well as the proximity to *whiteness*, the norms against which all groups are measured, is key to knowing our identities. Understanding we’re all the same, but we were all presented with different choices is key to understanding our identities and seeing our privilege.

● **Understand Relationships:** Recognize the differences between nonprofits and for-profits and that both types of organizations deserve equal respect. Understand and acknowledge there is a mutually beneficial relationship in the nonprofit and skills-based volunteer interaction. Volunteers are not usually the issue area experts on community service issues. In many ways, volunteers are the students and for nonprofit staff teaching volunteers takes time.

● **Become More Self-Aware:** Volunteers must be self-aware of assumptions they bring to engagements, the space they occupy, and time they take up. For nonprofits, engaging with volunteers is an opportunity cost that requires investment of staff time—one that can reap great benefits when volunteers understand that engaging with nonprofits is a privilege.

● **Embrace a Growth Mindset:** Practicing an active open mindset is key to sharing power. While skills-based volunteers have a lot of expertise, they also have to be willing to be humble and take a step back when they don’t know a lot about the communities served. Just as businesses use persona mapping to understand customer needs, volunteers can ask about nonprofit data to understand the communities they serve.

● **Own Accountability:** Practicing self-awareness, humility, and acknowledging or apologizing when at fault is key to sharing power in order to build trust between volunteers and nonprofit organizations. Nonprofit leaders need to know that volunteers have done the work to understand the missions of the nonprofit organization and the people being served. Trust is only earned after accountability is taken, and trust is the key to successful volunteer engagements.

It’s about building a bridge of trust to work effectively together.
COMMITMENT TO EQUITY

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Learning about power and privilege isn't a check box, it's an awakening. Once you see systems, you can see ways that you're benefiting or perpetuating them, and you can practice sharing power and making change.

Along the way, have grace with yourself, because this is a learning journey. It’s a community effort: you’ll make mistakes, we’ll make mistakes, we’ll be uncomfortable, and we’ll learn together. FCF is committed to learning and improving how we as an organization, our volunteer Members, and Corporate Partners engage with our nonprofit Grant Partners in more equitable ways to build a more inclusive community together.

TRAINING REDESIGN METHODOLOGY

As part of its larger commitment to DEIB in the nonprofit sector, FCF evaluated and redesigned its existing 2019 Power & Privilege workshop. As FCF expanded its program areas in 2020 from individuals joining volunteer teams to corporations providing volunteer teams of six to eight team members, FCF received input from nonprofit organizations and individuals to update the training. From January to April 2021, FCF convened a team of volunteer program designers that have cross-sector professional experience from both the nonprofit and corporate sectors.

Designers convened twice weekly to conduct a robust collaborative design process. A second team of advisors reviewed the work product and offered direction and support. The designers and advisors were offered stipends as appreciation for their time and expertise. The design team used surveys with volunteer members and interviews with nonprofit and corporate leaders to gather input. Candid insights and stories from nonprofit leaders shaped the training workshop content.
Special thanks to the following individuals who contributed to the research, prototype development, and redesign.

**Design Team**

Kim Dabbs • *Global Director*, Social Innovation, Steelcase  
Ramya Gopal • *Managing Director*, Product, PowerMyLearning  
Cassie Gruenstein • *(former) Chief Strategy Officer and project leader*, FCF  
Josh Torres • *Founder + Executive Leadership Coach*, BE/volved Coaching  
Adam Weiler • *Global Manager*, Social Innovation, Steelcase

**Advisors**

Dominick Albano • *Vice President, Marketing and Strategic Communications*, FCF  
Amar Al Hosani • *(former) Program Manager*, FCF  
George Aye • *Co-Founder & Director of Innovation*, Greater Good Studio  
Valerie Neumark • *Co-Founder, Director of Strategy & Innovation*, rootid; FCF Board Member  
Ariel Salome • *Program Manager*, Leadership Development and Exec Coaching, Lyft  
Cassie Zawilski • *(former) Program Manager*, FCF

**Alumni Grant Partners leaders interviewed:**

Javier Celedon • *Operations Director*, Community Technology Alliance  
Lauren Fogel • *(former) Vice President*, Programs, One Degree  
Jordan Levine • *Epidemiologist*, YLabs  
Sharon Miller • *Executive Director*, Renaissance Entrepreneurship Center  
Erica Moha • *Executive Director*, Community Education Partnerships  
Jessica Nowlan • *Executive Director*, Young Women’s Freedom Center  
Adewale OgunBadejo • *Workforce Development Manager*, GRID Alternatives  
Jodi Pincus • *(former) Executive Director*, Rising Sun Energy Center  
Leah Spelman • *Executive Director*, Partnerships for Trauma Recovery  
Victoria Westbrook • *Director of Programs & Operations*, Code Tenderloin
Corporate representatives interviewed:

Renata Bell • Product Marketing Director, Sourcing and Diversity in Talent Solutions, LinkedIn

Aubrey Blanche • Director of Equitable Design, Product & People, Culture Amp

Dominique Hollins • Director of Culture & Inclusion, Cloudera

Ariel Salome • Program Manager, Leadership Development and Executive Coaching, Lyft

Brigid Warmerdam • Senior Manager, Equality Education, Salesforce

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About Full Circle Fund

Full Circle Fund is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and community that leverages volunteers’ time, resources, and intellectual capital to accelerate nonprofits and build resilient communities. For over 20 years, members from the private, public, and nonprofit sectors work in partnership with local community groups to scale solutions to the biggest problems affecting communities. Through its unique model of engaged philanthropy, Full Circle Fund has unlocked over $12 million in positive social change. For more information, visit www.fullcirclefund.org.