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Spotlight of the Month



Grassroots Philanthropy☆☆☆☆

Field Notes of a Maverick Grantmaker
by Bill Somerville with Fred Setterberg

"Why aren't we --the philanthropic sector-- doing a better job?"

This is the question posed by authors Bill Somerville and Fred Setterberg in their new book Grassroots Philanthropy, in which they explore the potential for foundations to transform American life. However, as they argue, the field of philanthropy (as it is) is riddled with shortcomings, and as such, foundations have yet to reach their full potential for impact. As noted in the book, "foundations today possess a dazzling amount of wealth --some 67 thousand institutions have assets in the billions-- and the numbers are growing." And, this, as they argue, constitutes, "the raw capital for building a better world."

But what exactly are the shortcomings of the philanthropic community, and how are these shortcomings preventing foundations from truly promoting transformative change within society? According to the authors, lackluster performance within the foundation community can be attributed to several factors. Namely:

- Paper-laden bureaucracy
- Slow, stubborn, and unresponsive program officers
- An aversion to risk
- A focus on studying problems rather than generating new ideas

- And, just plain passivity

However, be not dismayed! Although the philanthropic community currently is not operating at full potential, there is hope! Specifically, in Somerville's experience as a foundation executive for over 30 years, he identifies five principles that foundation executives should begin focusing on in efforts to overcome the lackluster performance of the sector. These include:

- Locating outstanding people doing important work
- Moving quickly
- Embracing risk
- Focusing on ideas instead of problems
- And, taking initiative

I gave this book 4 stars, only because I would have liked to see indepth cases of foundations operating under a model proposed in the book, and possibly, juxtaposed with other foundations operating at status quo. Nevertheless, the book, although not grounded in empirical research, provides a very practical and commonsensical approach to philanthropy --focus less on bureaucracy and more on impact. And, similar to Joel Fleishman in his book The Foundation, the author's describe the philanthropic community as a vehicle for social change with tremendous potential. In general, both books, *Grassroots Philanthropy* and *The Foundation*, provide constructive approaches for achieving full potential within the philanthropic sector --and in this sense, are highly complementary to one another.

However, the extent to which the principles and guidance offered in either of the books will actually be applied within the philanthropic sector is anyone's guess...