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Becoming a Part of Quebec's Social Fabric: Lessons from the Chagnon Foundation's Growth Trajectory from 2000-2018

By Jean-Marc Chouinard and François Lagarde

Most philanthropists create a foundation as a way to give back to society. They commit their money, skills, experience, and knowledge to what promises to be most useful and satisfying (Philanthropic Foundations Canada, 2015). Sooner or later, however, they learn that the society or community they wish to serve has very specific opinions and expectations regarding the role of a foundation.

From noble intentions to unforeseen criticism

Since its creation in 2000, the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation has gone through a number of learning cycles with respect to its role and its legitimacy. Despite the best intentions and significant achievements, the Chagnon Foundation has been the object of social criticism — criticism that has had a constructive influence on its trajectory.

The Foundation's initial period of operation from 2000 to 2006 could be described as "entrepreneurial." To fulfill its original mission of preventing poverty and illness, the Foundation provided funding for a large number of organizations and launched major initiatives. The presence of such a large private philanthropic player on the Quebec social landscape was something new, however. Even though the Foundation had consulted extensively with social and public health institutions, it was primarily seen as an entrepreneurial actor. The Foundation was not behaving like a social actor that was obliged to collaborate fully with other social actors (Fontan et al., 2018). Its evaluation approach was fairly closely based on an independent entrepreneur model.

The Foundation's second period, from 2007 to 2014, began with some major decisions:

1. To focus on the prevention of poverty by contributing to the educational success of young Quebecers, thus actively supporting the priorities often reaffirmed by Quebec society;
2. To adopt two complementary strategies: mobilization of communities and mobilization of society; and
3. To recognize the central role of the state in the areas of poverty and education by establishing

three key partnerships with the Quebec government to focus on healthy lifestyles, early childhood, and student retention. Three non-profit organizations were created to operationalize these partnerships, with joint governance arrangements. During these years, the Foundation's evaluation model was largely influenced by the culture of accountability in government.

The development of partnerships between the Foundation and the Government of Quebec gave rise to a second, more significant, wave of social criticism. The concept of a "private" agreement was questioned, in this case, an agreement between the state and a private foundation that left no room for public debate on the need, the meaning, the reach, or the ultimate goal of the proposed partnership (Fontan et al., 2018). Critics frequently played the democracy card. Although the partnerships had resulted in the Foundation "losing" its direct ties with communities, the perception was that the three non-profit organizations that managed the partnerships were no more than "branches" of the Foundation on which it was imposing its solutions.

In 2015, at the culmination of an 18-month process, the Chagnon Foundation and the government decided not to renew these partnerships, specifically to allow the Foundation to recover its distinctive, legitimate philanthropic role (Philanthropic Foundations Canada, 2017). That decision provided the opportunity to reflect and take stock of the Foundation's major achievements as well as the critical views of its legitimacy, which were variations on the same messages: "Don't tell us, support us;" "don't negotiate, collaborate;" "don't replace government, complement it;" and "don't monitor, learn."

We concluded that:

- Our legitimacy and relevance cannot be self-proclaimed: it must be earned through dialogue, trust, respectful relationships, and philanthropic practices. Representatives of civil society must have a sense of ownership and involvement in our governance;
- Our posture should not be that of an independent actor, but an actor who has an interdependent relationship with multiple stakeholders;
- Our contribution is not in terms of what we do but rather whom and how we support;
- Our role is not to come up with solutions to be implemented by others, but to support those who are on a journey to innovate, seek, and implement their own solutions; and
- Our approach to evaluation should not be to document the impact of isolated initiatives on individual children, but to learn how we can be more helpful in reinforcing the capacity of civil society organizations to achieve *their* own objectives and learn along the way.

It's not about us!

In other words, we realized that the best way to be useful, relevant, and legitimate is to rethink our role from society's perspective on common objectives. We launched the process by reflecting and connecting with a wide range of stakeholders. Our legitimacy is not derived solely from those we support; in fact, the most credible defenders of our legitimacy may be those who do not need or want the Foundation's money.

Stakeholders suggested that we begin by formulating our vision — a vision most of them share when it comes time to think about what can collectively be done for children growing up in Quebec: "Contributing to make Quebec a supportive, equitable and inclusive society that enables every child and every family to realize their full potential and play an active role in that society."

We then articulated our unique role in a way that was clearly distinct from that of the government, focused on the people and organizations we support: to provide long-term support for organizations and associations that are actively developing their capacity for sustainable efforts aimed at creating the conditions to ensure the educational success of all children, particularly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

One link in the chain

We fully recognize that we are only one link in a long chain of social actors. The mission of the Chagnon Foundation is to prevent poverty by focusing on the educational success of young people across Quebec. We share the aspirations of most citizens of Quebec, in that we want to work together to create sustainable conditions to reduce obstacles and inequality in the areas of poverty and educational success. This is a fundamental social project that requires the shared will and commitment of the greatest possible number of people. In its role as a funding body, the Chagnon Foundation supports only a fraction of the initiatives needed to ensure the educational success of all children in the province.

The purpose of this article is not to provide a description of our future orientations, which are set out in detail on our website at fondationchagnon.org. What we want to stress is that if a foundation wants to truly live up to its motivation to give back and be a legitimate player, it must see itself — and be seen — as a collective tool for change. In other words, as serving a societal project that is greater than it is.

Reaching out for feedback

Between June 2017 and the fall of 2018, we embarked on a series of 68 meetings that allowed us to discuss our role, our past, and future with more than 760 representatives of organizations from a multitude of milieus: community, philanthropic, social, early childhood, education, public health, government, municipal, university, union, and economic. This proved to be a significant step towards our regaining a certain degree of legitimacy.

According to a survey by Ad Hoc Research in May 2018, the vast majority of the 240 leaders from all sectors of Quebec society who participated felt that the Chagnon Foundation was evolving in the right direction with its new orientations. The survey's main findings were as follows:

- 97% of respondents currently have a favourable perception of the Foundation;
- 89% feel they have a personal connection with the Foundation;
- 89% have heard about the Foundation's new orientations;
- 85% think that the Foundation is moving in the right direction; and
- 87% see the new orientations as a significant change.

According to respondents, the most favourable elements of the Foundation's general orientation are long-term support (82%), a focus on disadvantaged areas (80%), and an approach centred on developing the ability of organizations and associations to take action (79%).

Since the Foundation launched its new orientations, it is perceived as being more of a learning organization (+39%), an active listener (+36%), a better collaborator (+32%), more respectful (+23%), and consistent (+18%). It is also seen as less interventionist (-34%), less rigid (-26%), less controlling (-24%), and less demanding (-20%).

These improvements can never be taken for granted: participants in the survey also said that “seeing was believing.” Although our new orientations are perceived as relevant (8.1/10), consistent (8/10) and legitimate (8.2/10), respondents felt they could also be clearer (7.5/10) and more transparent (7.8/10). During follow-up telephone interviews conducted between June 28 and July 5, 2018, respondents were asked to specify where they thought improvement was needed. Their answers told us that more concrete examples would promote a better understanding of the Foundation’s new orientations, how we would implement them, and their impact on organizations.

Success is not a point; success is a path

In an excellent 2012 TEDx Talk, Paul Hughes said that “Success is not a point [in time], success is a path.” The same could be said about earning legitimacy and achieving relevance. These qualities are in the eye of the beholder: they cannot be self-proclaimed, and they are never definitively obtained.

The Chagnon Foundation has embarked on this path. We are serious about making a difference by supporting those who are making a difference. The quality of our relationships and the authenticity of our support will be the key defining factors in our acceptance by Quebec society as a valued and legitimate element of its social fabric.

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