



Fay Fuller Foundation

Fay Fuller Foundation: Co-designing structures for community-led decision-making

Fay Fuller Foundation kaupapa

Fay Fuller Foundation is a private philanthropic organisation in South Australia, founded in 2003 by Margaret ‘Fay’ Fuller with a broad and flexible remit to support the health of South Australians. Since establishment, the foundation has distributed more than \$20 million in funding to almost 70 organisations.

The foundation’s purpose is to “resource community determined responses to complex challenges”. This is underpinned by principles of being community-centred and enabling communities to be self-determining; building trust-based partnerships that go beyond financial resourcing; and seeking to influence the wider determinants and inter-connected systems that impact the focus areas in which the foundation seeks to achieve impact.

Fay Fuller Foundation’s focus areas include mental health and wellbeing, First Nations-led health funding, and ‘practice and collaboration’, which includes developmental collaborative work to strengthen the foundation’s own philanthropic practice.

Whakapapa – The Fay Fuller journey

Director Carolyn Curtis reflects that the foundation’s board “has journeyed from a space of touching and feeling everything and using their heart and passion to decide where money goes, through to willingly letting go of that and embracing what it takes to bring change by asking ‘who should have the power here?’”.

Over time this has led to “a slow letting go of ego [and power], building of trust, and pivoting to almost the entire opposite end of the spectrum, towards thinking that people in communities have the wisdom and experience to decide where and when money flows, and who we as the Foundation need to be to enable that”.

That mindset shift at the board level created space for the foundation to recognise its responsibility to supporting First Nations’ philanthropy, health and wellbeing. Chief Executive, Niall Fay, reflects that this enabled an honest conversation where the foundation realised that it needed “not to determine ourselves what a model of best practice philanthropy with the Aboriginal community would look like, but allowing a process to emerge where that is defined by community, for community, and is run by community”.

How The Philanthropic Landscape key practices present in the work of Fay Fuller Foundation

Through its First Nations Health Funding initiative, Fay Fuller Foundation has moved into a space of overt power-sharing, enabling Indigenous self-determination through models of decision-making and priority setting that are actively designed by and for Aboriginal communities. However, the process for arriving at this space has been a long one of “being patient, building high-trust relationships and legitimacy for being a supporter of community [...] of coming in with an offer, as opposed to a tell or an ask”.

For Carolyn, “making cultural shifts in philanthropy is less about the skills or structures that you need to build, but what you need to let go of. I have really seen our board and foundation let go [of power], so that our strategy, funding, and influence can be made more impactful for the community. If we could get more foundations into that space, we’d see a remarkable shift”.

This practice of letting go of power and trusting community-led decision-making is one that, Carolyn reflects, takes constant work. “We are like an elastic band, there is always a tendency for snapping back to what we think we know, but we know that throwing money at things can do more harm than good. We need to keep asking what we can do to help communities succeed.”

Niall recognises that, across philanthropy, a lot of intended participatory decision-making structures were being designed by philanthropy first, and then being imposed on community. Fay Fuller Foundation has tried to flip this. “Our practice is about being clear that we aren’t best placed to determine the structure of things, but rather understand that we can build a square, circle, triangle, or star if that meets community needs, rather than forcing them to fit into our box [...] We’ve had some fantastic wins by not centring the foundation”.

An ‘interim’ model of community-led decision-making has been established within the First Nations Health Funding initiative, while a broader and more long-term model continues to be developed. The ultimate goal is to enable Indigenous health experts and Indigenous communities to make decisions about the prioritisation of philanthropic dollars to support health and wellbeing outcomes, using an Indigenous decision-making model.

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Niall underlines the importance of adaptability and learning to the success of community-led ways of work. “Our model will need to evolve. We will be continually refining the way that the community leads this decision-making model, while

the ‘what’ [is funded] is continually refined by the input of Indigenous health experts. By doing this, we can take into consideration the social, emotional, and cultural wellbeing of the community, to heal and to grow in ways that community are determining”. One future possibility is for this model to involve the establishment of an entirely separate and autonomous Indigenous fund, controlled by community, into which multiple funders co-invest in ways determined by the community.

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Fay Fuller Foundation’s deliberate move to work with First Nations communities using a power-sharing model also illustrates the foundation’s journey of decolonising its practice. Niall explains that “our privilege has been exposure to a First Nation concept of time, of constant loops, of tens of thousands of years of consideration in relation to responsibilities to community [...] We’ve had to rethink how we consider time, our engagement with community, and how we need to adapt our structures.”

Niall reflects that a key first step in this process was committing to “showing up” and doing the work of relationship building, and building legitimacy by showing communities that the offer of partnership was authentic and enduring. The foundation is now at a point in its own journey where it can consider how its own core structure might be re-imagined,

to align more clearly with Indigenous models. “We are looking at someone to come onto our board with a brief to fundamentally adjust our governance structures and practices within an Indigenous framework”.

Through working to uplift community voice, other philanthropic funders in the state are seeing the potential of this community-led way of working and are keen to invest. Beyond the additional dollars leveraged, the big ‘win’ has been influencing other funders to move along on their own journeys of decolonising practice and examining how problematic structures, mindsets, and processes might be dismantled to make space for equitable partnerships with First Nations communities. Niall notes that “there are other foundations outwardly articulating that philanthropy needs to change, especially in relation to First Nations communities [...] What we need to do is make sure First Nations partners have space to speak to influence this practice and the role that philanthropy could be playing”.

As the foundation continues to explore the practices and decision-making structures needed to enable community self-determination and impact, Niall explains that the foundation’s attention is focused on trying to move from an offer of allyship to one of coalition. “Allyship still seems to signal a beneficiary kind of relationships, whereas a coalition of change recognises our roles and responsibilities for achieving change together [...] of communities partnering with us on their own terms”.