



Dusseldorp Forum: Deep, long-term relationships that support community-led systems change agendas

Dusseldorp Forum kaupapa

Dusseldorp Forum is a family philanthropic foundation focused on improving education, health, and social outcomes for children, their families, and communities across Australia. The organisation was established in 1989 from a grant of shares to mark the retirement of GJ (Dick) Dusseldorp as founder and executive chairman of the Lend Lease group of companies. In establishing the Forum, Dusseldorp sought to make a tangible difference to the lives of young Australians by bringing people together to develop shared solutions to complex challenges.

Today, Dusseldorp Forum works proactively with a select number of lighthouse partners to support place-based, community-led initiatives that transform the life opportunities of children and their families. This approach involves working collaboratively across government, not-for-profits, corporates, philanthropy, and communities to connect dots and achieve lasting systems change. Initiatives are intended to act as demonstration sites for how communities can lead systems change so that resources are better aligned to community needs.

The Dusseldorp Forum team focuses on building trusted, long-term partnerships to contribute to a range of intended system-level outcomes that include equipping communities to lead change, cultural regeneration, and funding policy/system reform for greater equity. Each lighthouse partnership involves funding – which community governance determines how to mobilise – as well as a range of other tangible support and resources provided by Dusseldorp Forum, including things like advocacy alongside community leaders to government and other funders, sitting on governance bodies, and providing connections to and resourcing external expertise.

Whakapapa – the Dusseldorp journey

Executive Director Teya Dusseldorp describes Dusseldorp Forum’s approach as “working deeply over the long-term in a number of communities to support the community-led systems change agendas of those places”. Teya explains that this can look different in each community based on their respective priorities and aspirations, but the common thread is that the relational and community-led approach

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This way of working emerged after the 2008 global financial crisis, when Teya invested significant time engaging with community leaders and First Nations elders to understand what the lasting impact of Dusseldorp Forum’s work to date had been, and critically, the specific issues that were of priority concern to communities. Board member Lindie Clark describes this as a “listening and learning voyage” alongside First Nations communities, and credits it with helping challenge the Dusseldorp Forum board to understand that its relatively narrow focus on education as a gateway to increasing opportunities for young people wasn’t sufficiently holistic to meet the complex needs and aspirations of the communities it was trying to serve.

Dusseldorp Forum was invited into the New South Wales community of Bourke and began building direct relationships with First Nations leadership, which surfaced priority concerns around the youth justice system as a root cause issue affecting wider youth health, education, and employment opportunities. Teya reflects that

Dusseldorp has learnt to listen to communities about the solutions they hold. “We come in as partners behind communities to assist in enabling those solutions. Developing long-term and deep relationships over time is key to how we work with communities”.

How The Philanthropic Landscape key practices present in the work of Dusseldorp Forum

Dusseldorp Forum now manages a small number of partnerships – some over ten years old – to ensure it is able to dedicate enough time to making its relationships with communities authentic and effective. Each partnership is underpinned by a relationship plan that captures shared priorities as they evolve and shift. Also important is working with communities to ensure they develop fit-for-purpose governance structures that enable them to authentically hold decision-making about resourcing these plans.

Teya explains that Dusseldorp Forum’s relationship model illustrates its mindset shift to “to follow community’s lead based on what they know [...] and put faith and trust in community decision-making”. This isn’t a traditional funder-fundee relationship – and while Dusseldorp Forum brings funding and other resources to the table, it is the community deciding what that resourcing is going to do. Lindie reflects that “the amount of money that the Forum is investing is relatively modest, but the dollars

are only part of the resourcing package, which is the people, the relational form of engagement, and being a leadership sounding board”. Dusseldorp Forum also has an explicit internal budget line for resourcing relationship building and is continually thinking about what is needed to build trust and relationships.

Dusseldorp Forum also helps to broker investment by other funders into the communities that it is partnering with, helping ensure that this funding is managed on the communities’ own terms by encouraging those investors to adjust their practices rather than expecting communities to shapeshift to multiple funding and reporting demands. Teya shares that one of Dusseldorp Forum’s partnerships in Victoria has developed a ‘Philanthropic Alliance’ of funders. “We have six-monthly get togethers; we all get the same reports, and we come together to verbally discuss these in ways that give opportunity for cross-fertilisation and strategic discussion to tap into the shared expertise, influence, and connections we hold”.

Dusseldorp Forum’s community partners are continually pushing boundaries around practice. Governance is a key example of this, with work ongoing to explore the role and structure of First Nations governance models and opportunities for intergenerational pathways that bring younger generations into those spaces. Teya explains that this governance development work is also a good example of how Dusseldorp Forum is learning to examine its own practices and structures

as its community partners grapple with these types of issues. Dusseldorp Forum sees it as important to turn the mirror on itself, seeing that “it isn’t a case of us and them; that we are part of the system”. For Lindie, a key challenge and opportunity for the Dusseldorp Forum moving forward is navigating how, as a constituted family foundation, it can make space for First Nations communities to be better represented in its own extended governance and decision-making mechanisms. Teya outlines that this work “is about the intelligence that diversity of thought and experience brings to our practice”.

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Values-based practice is increasingly coming to the fore as Dusseldorp Forum refines its way of working alongside communities. Teya shared that communities are asking for it to articulate its principles more clearly. Working through this with the board and partners is a process that Dusseldorp Forum is taking its time to get right. “We need to be able to not only communicate our principles but embody them; because our partners want us to play more of a role model role, being upfront about our ‘how’ and ‘why’, so that others can have more of an understanding of what our different way of working looks like.” Lindie adds that this process is pushing Dusseldorp Forum to “get bolder about articulating what it stands for –

which is racial equity, gender equity, and cultural regeneration”.

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For Teya, the key next practice is about being accountable to these principles and values-based practices. “In philanthropy, no one is checking what we do, so we have a responsibility to be accountable to those we are serving”. To respond to this challenge the Forum has developed a measurement framework with a specific focus on checking in with its partners to test how it is embodying its principles, and seeking honest, critical feedback.

Dusseldorp Forum is overtly working on local, regional, and national systems change agendas alongside its community partners. Across the work, this is enabling the Forum to build a more nuanced understanding of the conditions that support change, and the role that philanthropy can play as an actor in these systems. Teya reflects that “a lot of philanthropic foundations are working on those [conditions for systems change] layers of policy, resources, and structures. We’ve been focusing on policy reform and structural mechanisms for shifting power”. However, Dusseldorp Forum is now beginning to deepen its focus, seeing potential for driving structural change by focusing on shifting wider belief systems through transformative narratives and stories.

To this end, Dusseldorp Forum is proactively leveraging its own internal

dedicated communications role to create opportunities “for our partners to lift their heads above the clouds and share and celebrate their stories of change.” It is also currently working on resourcing communities to have sovereignty over their own data, and cultivating practices around community storytelling, which Teya believes holds much promise for the mindset shifts needed to drive wider structural reform. “We get so far with influencing government people, but they keep snapping back [to business as usual], because they actually haven’t shifted how they see people in communities and the belief that the expertise and power sits outside of community”. Board member Lindie Clark reflects how Dusseldorp Forum’s own mindset shifts were heavily influenced by “hearing the powerful narratives from Dusseldorp Forum’s First Nations partners”.

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Looking forwards, Teya believes that the opportunities for Dusseldorp Forum will be in growing the connections between government and communities while “removing ourselves as the translator, and resourcing communities to do their own storytelling”; as well as continuing to influence wider practices by “challenging what counts as evidence in philanthropy”.