Co-Governance in Philanthropy

Amplify Fund was created in 2017 to model a different form of philanthropy, including who makes decisions and how they are made. We have learned a lot over the last nine years. In this document we describe the process behind our evolving governance structure, the thinking behind the changes, and lessons that we learned. We hope our lessons on page 4-6 of this memo can inform other funders' thinking about governance.

While co-governance is hard work that takes staff capacity, planning, and funder buy-in, we believe it is a worthwhile investment.

WHERE THE CO-GOVERNANCE IDEA CAME FROM:

Amplify was initially intended to close in 2022, five years after its formation. By 2021, we realized there was more work to do, so we decided to extend the life of the Fund. At that time, we also saw an opportunity to overhaul our governance structure to more closely align with our value of shifting decision-making to grantees, especially Black women, without burdening them. With approval from our funders we created the Future of Amplify process led by consultants Latonya Slack and Susan Misra. Grantees from all of our places enthusiastically participated and ultimately decided to create a governance body comprised of ⅔ grantees and ⅓ funders with three initial tasks:

- Make strategic decisions to ensure that Amplify stays true to our vision, values, and goals.
- Guide the implementation of specific issues by advising the staff on those issues.
- Focus on strategy, not specific grantmaking decisions or day-to-day work plan decisions.

Photo Credit: Amplify/NFG

AMPLIFY FUND
NEIGHBORHOOD FUNDERS GROUP

HOW MEMBERS WERE SELECTED:

With this mandate in hand, staff and consultants created an application process to identify members for what we terms the “Co-Leadership Committee” (CLC). 18 grantees applied, and after reviewing the applications, staff selected 3 funders and 11 grantee leaders to sit on the committee; however, due to attrition, the final committee was composed of 1 funder and 11 grantee leaders.

Susan Perry Cole
President/CEO
North Carolina Association of Community Development Corporations

Brandi Fisher
Founder/CEO
Alliance for Police Accountability

Omar Ayala González
Executive Director
Urbe Apie

Curtis Hill
Executive Director
Columbus County Forum

Faybra Jabulani
Interim Executive Director
Forward Through Ferguson

Tequila Johnson
CEO
The Equity Alliance

Laura Martin
Executive Director
Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (PLAN)

Bernie Mazyck
South Carolina Association for Community Economic Development

Amy Morris
Interim President
Neighborhood Funders Group

Zoan T. Dávila Roldán
Leader
Colectiva Feminista en Construcción

Jennie L. Stephens
CEO
Center for Heirs' Property Preservation

Blake Strode
Executive Director
ArchCity Defenders

WHAT THE CO-LEADERSHIP COMMITTEE DID:

Over the course of two years, the Co-Leadership Committee met eight times, twice in-person. The consultants were responsible for facilitating the meetings and ensuring participation, and Amplify Fund staff was responsible for coordinating/scheduling the meetings, and informing the work of the Co-Leadership Committee. The eight meetings focused on different topics and had different goals:

SEPT 2023	NOV 2023	FEB 2024	MAY 2024
Relationship building, and orienting members to philanthropy and the role of the CLC.	Understanding and providing feedback on Amplify Fund's local grantmaking strategy process	Digging into outstanding questions from the Future of Amplify process, like "What is the mechanism by which Amplify Fund is held accountable to its values?"	Specifying the terms and conditions of CLC participation for new members

NOV 2024	MAR 2025	OCT 2025	NOV 2025
Processing the change in Amplify Fund leadership, and determining its impact on the CLC's role and staff's role.	Having a truthful conversation about Amplify's finances and capacity, and how that affected the staff's ability to support the CLC.	Introducing NFGs new presidents and brainstorming activities for the CLC given the severe budget constraints of Amplify Fund.	Formally closing, and celebrating the ambitions of the CLC.

WHY WE ENDED THE CO-LEADERSHIP COMMITTEE:

Throughout its tenure, the Committee's work was impeded by several issues, including external factors like the COVID-19 pandemic, and internal factors like budget constraints, staff and funder turnover, and challenges with identifying areas of work. Collectively, these challenges proved too much to surmount. We officially sunsetted the Co-Leadership Committee in November 2025.

LESSONS LEARNED

ORIENT CO-GOVERNANCE MEMBERS TO PHILANTHROPY SO THERE IS A BASELINE UNDERSTANDING OF THE ECOSYSTEM.

During the first meeting of the CLC, our facilitators gave an overview of "philanthropic-serving organizations," various types of funders and the issues they support (including significant details about Amplify Fund funders), Neighborhood Funders Group, and the organizations that support Amplify Fund's grantmaking like Assets Under Management and JustFund. While most CLC members were Executive Directors, and had familiarity with philanthropy, all of them expressed an appreciation for this overview, which allowed them a greater understanding of how to engage funders in their regions.

DETERMINE BARRIERS TO FUNDER INVOLVEMENT, AND WORK TO OVERCOME THOSE BARRIERS.

The main goal of the CLC was to alter the traditional funder-grantee relationship. By building trusting relationships between grantees and funders, we believed they could share decision-making about Amplify Fund. However, this effort proved immensely challenging. During its formation, the CLC had one only active funder participant, and this funder left their institution following the first in-person meeting, which meant that the main goal of the CLC was never realized. Consultants and staff worked hard to encourage funders, especially funders of color, to participate but were met with a variety of challenges: too little capacity, unease with the potential racial dynamics (especially from white funders), discomfort with non-traditional power sharing, lack of interest. The reality of staff turnover in philanthropy also affected our ability to recruit. While we tried to address some of these barriers, we believe the biggest issue was a lack of funder institutional buy-in or support. More funder organizing at the president- or trustee-level might have addressed this.

INCLUDE ALL STAFF IN THE CO-GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE.

In order to reduce burden, only two Amplify Fund staff members were involved in the Future of Amplify process, and two different ones were involved in the CLC. This discontinuity carried the same challenges as our lesson above regarding orientation and time. However, it also meant that certain aspects of Amplify's work were not included in the co-governance work plan. Evaluation is ripe for thought partnership, grantee input, and participatory processes (as is Communications), but the Director of Learning and Communications was the least involved in the CLC, so it became difficult to incorporate those bodies of work into the CLC work plan. Which leads to the next lesson learned.

LESSONS LEARNED

ENSURE CONTINUITY BETWEEN THE ENVISIONING OF CO-GOVERNANCE AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CO-GOVERNANCE.

The Future of Amplify design stage was intended to lay the groundwork for the CLC. Despite these plans, we had trouble bridging conception with implementation. While two grantees in the Future of Amplify process became CLC members, the majority were new, which meant that orientation to the concept and reasoning behind co-leadership took longer than expected. It also meant some disagreement between the designers of the model and the implementers. For example, Future of Amplify members rejected the responsibility of making specific grant decisions to avoid holding that kind of power in their region, but CLC members wanted to make grantmaking decisions. This disagreement kept us in conversation about the role of the CLC for a long time. There were also continuity challenges with Amplify Fund staff turnover that was partly ameliorated with consistent consultants but that, nevertheless, resulted in the loss of institutional knowledge.

IDENTIFY BODIES OF WORK THAT ARE RIGHT-SIZED FOR CO-GOVERNANCE PRIOR TO IMPLEMENTATION.

While the broad responsibilities of the CLC were identified through the Future of Amplify process, the specific bodies of work were not. Before the creation of the CLC, staff should have asked themselves “which part of our work needs to be further developed?” and "which part of our work would be strengthened with grantee input?” This would have given applicants an understanding of the skills and input that we needed. It would have also given CLC members concrete tasks to accomplish together, which is what they desired. For example, when we created a sub-committee focused on refreshing our grantmaking strategies, there was significant interest and participation among CLC members. Unfortunately, the local strategy refresh process was nearly finalized by the time the subcommittee came together, so the members were just providing input on peripheral, small matters.

DO NOT EXCLUDE GRANTMAKING AND FUNDRAISING FROM THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CO-GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE.

Including grantees in Amplify Fund’s grantmaking and fundraising work would have required delicacy and significant capacity on behalf of staff. But for a pooled fund, the core of the work is grantmaking and fundraising – to exclude those from the purview of the CLC was a major gap. The tasks of interviewing local movement leaders as part of the local strategy refresh process, finalizing the local grantmaking strategies, and helping make grant decisions based on that strategy would have given CLC members a deep understanding of Amplify Fund. Similarly, building the CLC’s ability to champion Amplify Fund in fundraising conversations would have strengthened our pooled fund as much as our grantees’ skills.

LESSONS LEARNED

ALLOW MULTIPLE FORMS OF FEEDBACK TO ENSURE ALL PARTICIPANTS HAVE THEIR OPINIONS HEARD.

As mentioned above, the CLC had several meetings, some virtual and some in-person; however, the facilitators also regularly communicated with participants in 1:1 phone conversations and through email exchanges. This approach gave our participants an opportunity to contribute in a way that fit their capacity, and it aligned with our value of centering Black women without burdening them.

ALIGN YOUR NEW CO-GOVERNANCE BODY WITH YOUR LEGALLY REQUIRED NON-PROFIT BOARD.

The Future of Amplify participants wanted the CLC to feel like a Board, and assigned it tasks such as providing input on hiring executive staff, even as they understood that the CLC did not hold legal or fiduciary oversight. Unfortunately, because Amplify Fund sits within Neighborhood Funders Group, the Neighborhood Funders Group board holds significant responsibility for those tasks. Similarly, the Neighborhood Funders Group board (and the Assets Under Management board) has fiduciary responsibilities that limited CLC oversight of the Amplify Fund budget. One way to overcome these hurdles would have been to treat the CLC members like an advisory committee of the Neighborhood Funders Group board. This would have given them more relationships with funders (addressing our first lesson learned), a broader view of philanthropy outside of Amplify Fund, and real decision making power over hiring and budgeting.