

# Strategic Philanthropy

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**The following is a piece I wrote in 2010 as a result of 15 wonderful years at the Atkinson Foundation. I remain both interested and involved in assisting in developing more strategic ways to change the world through philanthropy.**

## **With My Hand on the Doorknob – In Search of Strategic Philanthropy**

Almost fifteen ago, I received a “the job is yours” call and the chance to serve one of Canada’s most important and enduring legacies, Joseph E. Atkinson’s crusades for social and economic justice.

As I prepare to pass the torch as Executive Director of the Atkinson Foundation, the advantage of 20/20 hindsight has led me to reflect on lessons learned about how to change the world, particularly through strategic philanthropy.

I joined the Foundation at the beginning of 1996, when the board was seeking a new approach to social change. The goal was to move from receiving proposals for “good works” to becoming a proactive organization, working with partners to advance evidence and ideas about how the future could be more just.

During its initial forty years, the Foundation had focused primarily on supporting the architecture of buildings. There were some remarkable grants made during these years. For instance, Mr. Atkinson’s vision of lifelong learning led to the creation of the Atkinson College at York and its commitment to adult education. Carleton University’s School of Public Administration, the first of its kind in Canada, was also seeded with the Foundation’s support.

But by the nineties, a changing public discourse led the Foundation’s board to shift its focus from the architecture of buildings to the architecture of ideas. In a time of public policy retrenchment, ideas were needed that might inspire the public and those who govern with a renewed impetus for shaping the kind of future that Mr. Atkinson relentlessly crusaded for in the first half of the last century: a more just, safer and healthier society for all, not just the few. As the Foundation made the move from reactive charitable giving to seeking a strategic impact, we understood early on that being “focused” was imperative.

Organizations—be it governments, businesses, or third sector agencies—that have twenty priorities, inevitably have no priorities. Faced with many choices to make and limited resources to invest, our own choice at the Foundation was between doing fewer things better and doing all things less well. We chose the former and decided to make clarity of purpose our mantra.

We also recognized that trying to choose a focus in a phone booth, or making decisions in isolation from what others were doing, would lead to limited impact. Choosing a focus does not mean going for it alone. It means going through a process of determining where the niches are, where there are people doing good work that we can relate to, and where we can complement and augment their work to help make the difference.

As we sought our niche areas, we invested our time and resources in convening the best and brightest thinkers, practitioners, researchers, and policy people to help us make good decisions.

It was this kind of honest, open-minded convening that led us down the pathways of early learning and care as a long-term mission; that inspired us to seek out the creation of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing; and more recently, to contribute to opening up space for new gains on poverty reduction policies.

The “us” in the Foundation’s approach is defined by a vast network of partners. Along the way we have met wonderful people and organizations that continue to inspire us. The Worker’s Action Centre is always ahead of the

curve on advancing the needs of precarious workers because of their bottom-up approach. The People for Education parents' network has relentlessly reminded Ontarians why public education is one of our greatest goods, and why early learning should be such an integral part, the foundational part of a lifelong learning system.

There are many, many other leading foundations, researchers, policy makers, key advisors, grassroots leaders, and people with lived experience, with whom we have the honour to work and learn from. At the end of the day, we know that nothing of meaningful change is the stuff of a single organization, let alone a single person.

Our respect for our partners makes reciprocity an important value for the Foundation. Reciprocity manifests itself in many interesting ways at Atkinson, including the manner in which we use and expand our "rolodex". For instance, we have been fortunate to play the significant role of broker, connecting those who are high on the lived experience of extraordinary challenges with those who are high on good intentions and decision-making power, but down a quart or two regarding what to do regarding making meaningful policy and program decisions.

In the work we have done with our partners, we have also learned that evidence is important, indeed a must. But reports alone are far from enough. Our pursuit of "architectures of ideas" has shown us that if you build it "they" will come to see the possibilities. This is why combining research with demonstration projects and aggressively communicating the results, has been so essential to impact.

For example, in Ontario, we are witnessing evidence-based politics and policy-making on full day learning for four and five year olds. This breakthrough has happened thanks, in some measure, to a strong framework of ideas developed by innumerable partners, buttressed by facts and experiences emanating from real examples of what's possible, with the Toronto First Duty demonstration sites easily coming to mind; this, along with compelling evidence and relentless communications about the social and economic results to be gained, has made a very big difference.

For those who have worked with the Foundation, mentioning the importance of communications is obvious. But communications can mean very different things to different people. For us, communications has little to do with books, reports, and media releases.

Communications is really about ideas and relationships. It has meant partnering with people and organizations with ideas worth advancing and building relationships of respect with those who communicate to various audiences.

It's about authenticity of information. It's about slowly developing reciprocal, respectful and trusting relationships with producers, editorialists, beat reporters, columnists and those who make and shape policy decisions. It's about being aware and sensitive to their needs, not just selling our "wants."

Strategic philanthropy, I have found, is often a very intuitive endeavour. Sometimes, it is about doing the very simple, the very obvious.

We have found that one of the best ways of showing what's best for our collective future is catching people and organizations doing things right today, tapping them on the shoulder, and providing them with unfettered resources to do their thing and to tell their stories.

We have been fortunate to find our Atkinson Economic Justice Fellows through just this approach. The roster to date has included a remarkable cohort of iconic Canadians and passionate and effective grassroots change agents! Such a simple premise: "wow, look at them, let's join their crusade," and three years or more of substantial unconditional support for their work is provided.

The Ruth Atkinson Hindmarsh Award is built on a similar premise. In honour of Mr. Atkinson's daughter, the iconic Mrs. Hindmarsh, a simple one or two page nomination of an initiative serving children can lead to a sizeable no-strings-attached cheque that essentially catches someone doing things right and encourages them to "carry on!"

As we strived to help others support their aspirational and inspirational journeys, we have tried to lead from within.

If the aim is to fund initiatives that assist the development of a more inclusive society, the work must begin inside—inside the funding organization and within the minds and hearts of those leading and supporting the organization.

In this regard, our board members and staff continue to engage in various forms of anti- oppression opportunities. These experiences begin to open us up to what it means to be excluded so that our own healing can begin to evolve before leaping ahead, riding premature assumptions about what others need. This helps to redefine “helping” from a place of real and perceived power imbalance to relationships that begin to feel genuinely collaborative.

I am also deeply gratified to have been associated with a foundation that has become a pioneer in mission-based investment, ensuring that Mr. Atkinson’s financial resources are invested in a manner that advances our social and economic justice mission, in particular our emerging experience in shareholder engagement.

Being able to stand on the shoulders of Joseph E. Atkinson has been a singularly special phase in my life. This past decade and a half has been a remarkable opportunity to learn, to form very special relationships and partnerships, and to be a more effective crusader for social and economic justice. It has been an amazing experience to sit around a board table with staff and colleagues who understand that foundation resources are risk capital that offer up the recurring mantra: “If we don’t fund it, who will?”

I am certain the residual effects of this experience will infuse every aspect of my continued journey.