



**Handy Lindsey**  
**on**  
**Building Strong Foundations:**  
**The First 100 Days**

~~~~~

*"I wish I had kept a journal."*

---

*Editor's note: Handy Lindsey became Executive Director of [The Cameron Foundation](#) in January 2004. BoardWalk Consulting is proud to have assisted the Foundation's search committee throughout the recruitment process.*

*A native of Mississippi, Handy spent most of his adult life in Chicago, where he played leadership roles in many of that city's most impactful organizations. When we first met, he was in his 15<sup>th</sup> year as head of the Field Foundation of Illinois; previously, he had been a senior executive at the Chicago Community Trust.*

*The Cameron Foundation, based in Petersburg, Virginia, is what is commonly referred to as a healthcare conversion foundation and resulted from the sale of the local community hospital to a for-profit entity. The proceeds from the sale became the new foundation's corpus, making it overnight the largest philanthropic force in the hospital's traditional service area. Handy Lindsey is the foundation's inaugural Executive Director.*

*We are honored that Handy accepted our invitation to be the first subject of our new series on leadership transitions, "Building Strong Foundations: The First 100 Days."*

~~~~~

***BoardWalk:*** **Once you accepted the new role, how did you prepare for your transition?**

***Handy Lindsey:*** Preparation was mainly a matter of adopting the proper mindset for learning how to live and work in a new and often confusing cultural context.

*"I expected culture shock and was not disappointed."*

First there is the issue of the South, where I had not lived since age 6. I expected culture shock and was not disappointed. I told myself that I would have to observe and come to an acceptance, if not a true appreciation, of the Southern way of doing things. Initially, I found myself being impatient (in typical Yankee style) with every business interaction because social interaction had to be satisfied first. I continue to try to adapt, but I expect that things will always happen a little too slowly

for my taste, though not for my tolerance. The point is, I assumed I would have to learn and quickly adapt to the community culture.

Second, with so little pre-existing organized philanthropy in the community, I assumed that I would have to be doing a lot of patient teaching (particularly with my board) because there had historically been little opportunity for board members to engage in, or even observe, philanthropic practice on a professional level. Successful negotiation of both of these challenges hinged upon my ability to be a good listener.

During the first few months, listening was perhaps my most intensive activity. I accepted every invitation to appear and speak everywhere in the community, and in every instance I tried to listen far more than I spoke.

*"Listening was perhaps my most intensive activity."*

Of course, the constituency that I listened to most attentively was my board. The upshot of all this listening is that I learned an awful lot in a relatively short time frame about the community's culture, its needs, its challenges, its aspirations and its expectations of what a new resource like the Cameron Foundation could do to change the quality of life for the area's residents. I am still listening two years later.

**BoardWalk: From your first day to your 100th, how did your priorities evolve?**

**HL:** 100 days is too short a period to actually appreciate how your priorities change. This is particularly true if you begin with a short range plan, as I did.

My priorities included getting to know the board and beginning to earn their trust; achieving an understanding in broad outline of the diversity and intensity of the community's needs, especially for healthcare; developing appropriate guidelines and articulated priorities for grantmaking that would be highly congruent with the community's needs; and laying out a roadmap for the board that would achieve all of the preceding as well as produce the Foundation's first cycle of grants within one year of my first day on the job. We did it in nine months.

My roadmap to grantmaking was completed and adopted by the board by April 23, 2004, nineteen days shy of 100. So, I guess the answer really is that my priorities did not evolve; rather I was steadfastly committed to them as they appeared, and ultimately proved, to be appropriate for our achieving all of our goals for the first year of operations.

**BoardWalk: What was the biggest surprise you encountered during those early weeks?**

**HL:** I had two big surprises in the early weeks of my newly accepted position. First, prior to my arrival the board had made numerous decisions about the Foundation's office space that would have been better left to staff. From day one, the accommodations for staff were inadequate and additional office space has had to be secured on two separate occasions within the past two years. I never informed the board of this mistake, but they came to recognize it as they appropriated funding for the expansion of office space twice within two years.

*"There were two big surprises."*

The second surprise was that finding appropriate program staff would be impossible if the recruitment efforts were limited to the Foundation's service region. Given the long-standing depressed economy of Southside Virginia, the area is a net exporter of young professional talent, as the best and brightest leave the area as soon as their training is completed. I solved the problem by recruiting outside of the community but subjecting applicants to a board-approved mandate that all foundation employees must currently reside, or be willing to relocate, within the Foundation's service region.

**BoardWalk: In hindsight, what proved to be the most impactful action you took or decision you made during that time?**

**HL:** My decision to approach my new community primarily in listening mode has been highly impactful. This action is probably more responsible than any other for the very positive reception the community has given to the Foundation's work.

It is pretty easy for most to see that there is great congruence between what they see the Foundation doing and what they believe needs to be addressed in the community. We listened, we heard what the community said were its needs, and our grantmaking program is highly responsive to those needs.

*"I am northern in temperament, but southern in compassion."*

A second important decision, but perhaps somewhat less so, was my decision to offer regular information sessions to give prospective applicants [for grants] what they need to know gain access to the Foundation's resources. Group information sessions are held three or four times prior to each grant cycle and often have standing-room-only attendance. The feedback we get is that, among foundations in the Richmond metropolitan area, The Cameron Foundation is

unique in its transparency and the assistance to access it provides applicant nonprofit organizations.

One an additional thought about what contributed to my successful transition during the first 100 days: In developing the roadmap to grantmaking, I presented the board with very clearly articulated short-term goals; argued for deferring generation of a long-term strategic plan until we better understood the diversity and depth of the community's needs (they agreed to undertake no such effort until after three years of grantmaking.); and I promised deliverables within the first 100 days that were substantially less than what I believed to be within our capacity and then we actually delivered at capacity.

Yeah, it's a sneaky trick, but it works perfectly for building the board's confidence in what we can achieve together. Even today, they continue to talk about how much we were able to achieve in a very short period of time as compared to other neighboring start-ups with which they were familiar. I believe that this has engendered a "can-do" attitude that will serve us well for some time to come.

**BoardWalk: What did you learn about yourself during the transition?**

**HL:** At the risk of stereotyping, I am northern in temperament, but southern in compassion. That is to say that I am impatient; I want to get quickly to the point and to get the job done. The southern manner sometimes drives me to distraction, but I absolutely love the way southerners share their resources and take care of and for one another.

**BoardWalk: Is there anything you wish you could change about your first 100 days?**

*"The curiosities I observed would have made for amusing reading."*

**HL:** I wouldn't change a thing about the first 100 days, but I should have kept a journal. Because the community tends to be backward looking in its problem-solving strategy (there is a default to traditional and/or historical approaches to addressing current issues), almost every day was an equal part of exhilaration and exasperation. The curiosities I observed would probably have made for amusing reading.

**BoardWalk: What advice do you have for others facing their own transition?**

**HL:** Forget the context in which you learned community practice, because your new community context can change all of your assumptions. What I learned in Chicago about how to be an effective grantmaker has to be substantially adapted for application in my current context, because the community's response to my approach is culturally driven.

The strategies I employ here have to be culturally sensitive; they must take account of community and personal histories; they must allow for a preference here for direct service interventions over advocacy and changing public policy; and they must accommodate the absence of a well-developed and sustainable nonprofit organization infrastructure.

So my advice becomes, Make every effort to quickly come to an understanding of your community's needs and dynamics, and then encourage your board to evolve programmatic responses that are maximally congruent with those needs and dynamics. Also, seek a mutually supportive and respectful partnership with your board that is rich in communication and contact.

Finally, challenge the board to think outside of its comfort zone, but accept the board's pace—and don't get too far out in front of them.

*"Forget the context in which you learned community practice, because your new community can change all your assumptions."*

---

"Building Strong Foundations: The First 100 Days" © 2006 by BoardWalk Consulting LLC.  
Permission granted to reprint, with attribution to BoardWalk Consulting.  
All other rights reserved.